FLAMINGO FACELIFT: WILL NATURE'S SEAGRASS RENEWAL HOLD?

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN

SINCE 1969

LOOKING OUT FOR COBIA

NEW LIMITS, NEW IDEAS POISED TO HELP RECOVER A SPRING FAVORITE

BLACK DRUM BY DESIGN
ART OF THE SURF CAST
SCOUT SPRING TURKEY
SHELLCRACKERS
OFFSHORE PRE-GAME
BASS SPAWN SEASON 101
BEST FILLET KNIVES

CONSERVATION
YOUR RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER: SIGN PETITION, TELL OTHERS!

FEBRUARY 2023

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

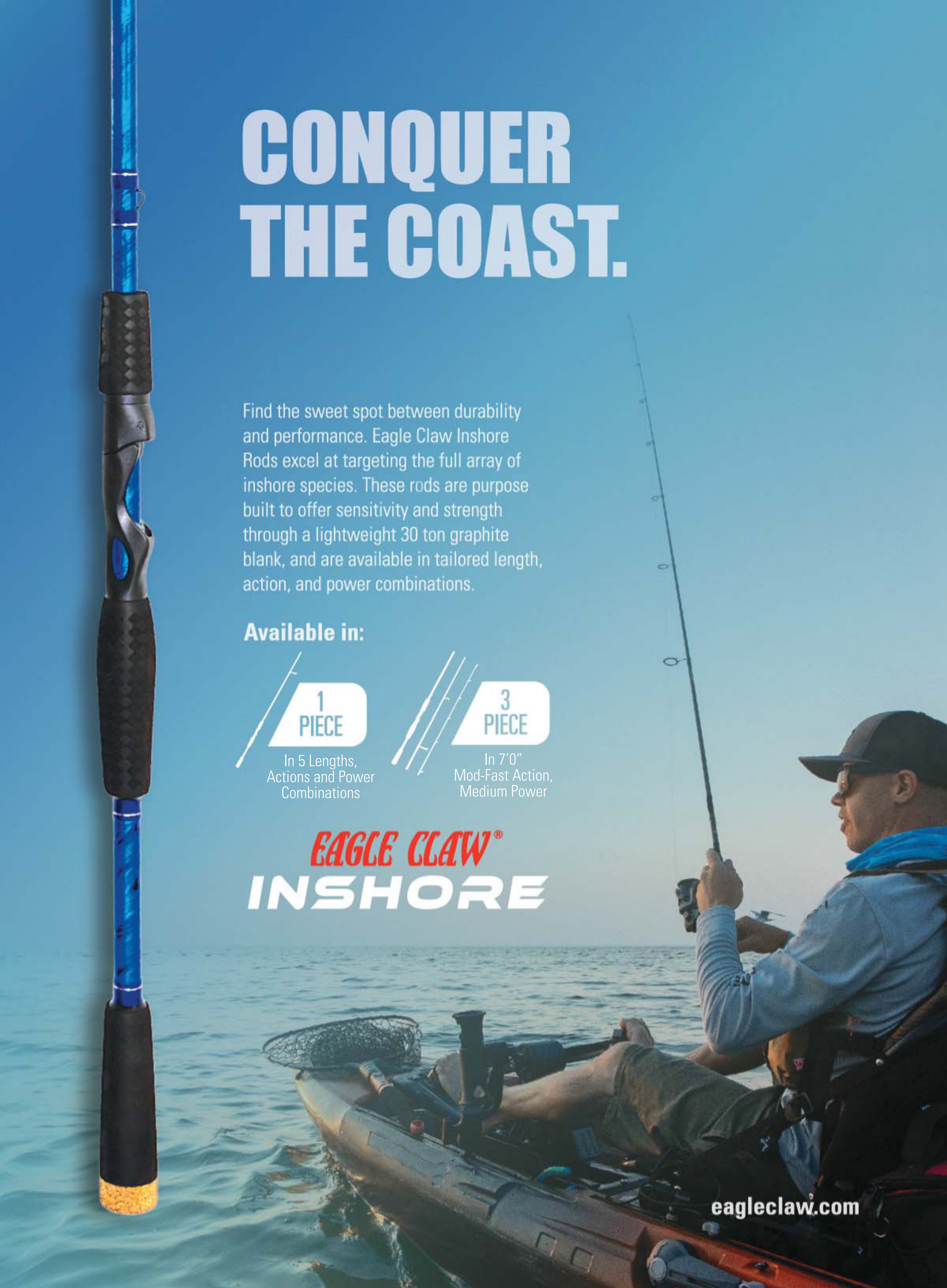
YAMAHA
XTO
GRADY-WHITE
Uniquely *Grady-White*.
gradywhite.com
POWERED BY
YAMAHA

Dream Catcher.

Freedom 375

GRADY-WHITE BOATS

Exceptional attention to detail.



CONQUER THE COAST.

Find the sweet spot between durability and performance. Eagle Claw Inshore Rods excel at targeting the full array of inshore species. These rods are purpose built to offer sensitivity and strength through a lightweight 30 ton graphite blank, and are available in tailored length, action, and power combinations.

Available in:

1 PIECE
In 5 Lengths,
Actions and Power
Combinations

3 PIECE
In 7'0"
Mod-Fast Action,
Medium Power

EAGLE CLAW®
INSHORE

eagleclaw.com

SCB R24

A DIVISION OF Shallow Sport®

COME SEE FOR YOURSELF

SEA TRIALS AT THE

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL BOAT SHOW

February 15-19, 2023

Legacy Marine
Stuart, FL • 772-218-9371
www.legacymarine.com

Naples Marina
Naples, FL • 239-643-0232
www.naplesmarina.com

Mayday Marine Services, LLC
St. Petersburg, FL • 727-422-9557
www.maydaymarineservices.com

www.scbboats.com

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN

FEBRUARY 2023 · VOLUME 55 NO. 2 · SINCE 1969

FEATURES

28
Of Cobia and Caution
Once-great spring fishery has been in a tailspin. Let's get it back on course.
BY BLAIR WICKSTROM

34
Paradise Not Lost
Fishing's on fire in Florida Bay right now. Flamingo's the hotspot. Here's why.
BY STEVE DOUGHERTY

42
Big Ugly
Black drum won't break any hearts, but they can surely break some line.
BY JUAN LEVESQUE

46
Art of the Surf Cast
Picture yourself at the beach. Rods, fresh bait, delicious fish. Go!
BY SID DOBRIN

52
Get the Edge
Fillet knives serrated, straight, curved, stainless, carbon steel, electric...
BY TIM LEWIS

56
A Calculated Approach
Florida bass are on the beds and personal bests are on the boards.
BY DAVID A. BROWN

DEPARTMENTS

"I approached a trial with my usual raised eyebrow..." p14

9 FROM THE EDITOR
The kids are alright

10 CALL TO ACTION
Right to Clean Water

22 SPORTSMAN'S KITCHEN
Venison backstrap pizza

24 CONSERVATION FRONT
Inside new amendment drive

88 TOURNAMENT INSIDER
King of the Beach crowned

92 FLORIDA TIDE CHARTS
Highs and lows, statewide

95 I'M A FLORIDA SPORTSMAN
Meet Alex "The Duck Nut"

96 AN OUTDOOR HAPPENING
Stephanie hits blackjack

EXPERT HOW-TO AND GEAR

12 OFFSHORE
Before the big day

14 BOATING
Four innovations

16 FRESH WATER
Get redear for spring

18 FLY FISHING
Tenkara to the test

20 HUNTING
Spring turkey tips

COVER: Nothin' fancy needed to catch cobia. Just need more cobia!
Photo by Pat Ford

Seagrass recovery in Florida Bay has been followed by an uptick in red drum (shown), snook and other gamefish. When nature maintains the balance of salinity and nutrients (less is more), and we don't screw it up, this is the result!

P34

Photo by Steve Dougherty

ACTION SPOTTER

62 KEYS
64 SOUTH
66 10,000 ISLANDS
68 SOUTHEAST
70 SOUTHWEST
72 WEST CENTRAL
74 BIG BEND
76 EAST CENTRAL
78 NORTHEAST
80 NORTHWEST
82 PANHANDLE
84 TROPICS

A hot black sea bass bite in the cool waters. p81

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN
CATCH MORE ONLINE

SELECT CONTENT AVAILABLE
NOW ON OUR DIGITAL CHANNELS

Allie Centerino, of Missouri, is photographed by Capt. Dave Perkins with a nice Spanish caught while fishing out of Key Largo.

DIGITAL WEB EXCLUSIVES
4 FOOL-PROOF SPANISH MACKEREL RIGS

Hungry schools of mackerel are heading south, tie these rigs for Spanish success.

YOUTUBE
SNAPPER IS FOR LOVERS

Impress your valentine with this fancy fish dinner curated by pro spearfisherwoman Valentine Thomas.

It's a roller coaster ride on the Gulf Stream, when north winds buck the north-flowing current.

PODCAST
FOUL WEATHER FISHING

This month Capt Rick and the guys focus on how to best navigate fishing amongst inclement weather and rough seas.

BECOME A SOCIAL STAR

Send post-worthy pics: @floridasportsmanmagazine or #floridasportsmanmagazine

GET YOUR MUG IN THE MAG

Email your best catches or scenic shots to photos@floridasportsman.com

THERE'S
ONLY ONE
BILL DANCE
WATCH
BILL DANCE
SALTWATER
MOTV.
MYOUTDOORTV.COM
BILL DANCE SALTWATER
SUNDAYS 10:30A ET
SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.
Outdoor

There are plenty of great anglers in this world. But there's only one Bill Dance. On *Bill Dance Saltwater*, the angling legend teaches you all about the featured species — and the techniques, baits and tactics that will get it in the boat.

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN
SINCE 1969

PUBLISHER Michael F.X. Cassidy

EDITORIAL STAFF
EDITOR IN CHIEF Jeff Weakley
MANAGING EDITOR Steve Dougherty
ART DIRECTOR Drew Wickstrom
SENIOR EDITOR Blair Wickstrom
BOATING EDITOR George LaBonte
PROJECTS EDITOR Rick Ryals
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Brenton Roberts
DIGITAL EDITOR Shelby Busenbark

FIELD EDITORS
Gabrielle Barnes (PANHANDLE), Brett Fitzgerald (TROPICS), Pepe Gonzalez (KEYS), William Greer (NORTHWEST), Ray Markham (W. CENTRAL), Joe Richard (BIG BEND), Matt Badolato (E. CENTRAL), Alan Sherman (SOUTH), Greg Stamper (SOUTHWEST), Matt Sturdivent (10,000 ISL)

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
David Brown, Mike Conner, Corky Decker, Sid Dobrin, Pat Ford, Willie Howard, Doug Kelly, Terry Lacoss, Tom Levine, Tim Lewis, Ed Mashburn, David McGrath, Ian Nance, Maggie Rosaine, Frank Sargeant, Peter Slis

ADVERTISING
Jim Langone (772) 763-2227
jim.langone@outdoorsg.com
Rhett Nelson (772) 763-2226
rhett.nelson@outdoorsg.com
Trey Wheeler (772) 763-2205
trey.wheeler@outdoorsg.com

ENDEMIC AD SALES
VP, ENDEMIC SALES Michael Savino
mike.savino@outdoorsg.com
Jim McConville (440) 791-7017

PRODUCTION MANAGER
Jean McElroy (772) 763-2209
jean.mcelroy@outdoorsg.com

SUBSCRIPTION HELP 1-800-274-6386

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN PODCAST/RADIO
Rick Ryals (904) 334-8808

EDITORIAL OFFICE
3725 SE Ocean Blvd., Suite 202, Stuart, FL 34996

WRITERS GUIDELINES editor@floridasportsman.com

SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES 1(800) 274-6386

Should you wish to change your address, order new subscriptions, or report a problem with your current subscription, you can do so by writing Florida Sportsman, P.O. Box 37539, Boone, IA 50037-0539, or e-mail us at ftncustserv@cdsfulfillment.com., or call TOLL FREE 1 (800) 274-6386.

BE AWARE THAT FLORIDA SPORTSMAN ONLY ACCEPTS SUBSCRIPTION REQUESTS FROM AUTHORIZED AGENTS! WE MAY NOT HONOR REQUESTS FROM UNAUTHORIZED AGENTS, AND YOU THEREFORE MAY LOSE YOUR MONEY IF YOU BUY FROM AN UNAUTHORIZED AGENT. If you are offered a subscription to Florida Sportsman, please call 1-800-274-6386 to determine if the agent is authorized. For more information on subscription scams, please visit www.ftc.gov.

Subscription rate for one year is $39.94 (U.S., APO, FPO, and U.S. possessions). Canada add $13.00 (U.S. funds) per year, includes sales tax and GST. Foreign add $15.00 (U.S. funds) per year.

Occasionally, our subscriber list is made available to reputable firms offering goods and services that we believe would be of interest to our readers. If you prefer to be excluded, please send your current address label and a note requesting to be excluded from these promotions to: Outdoor Sportsman Group – 1040 6th Ave, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10018-3703 Attn: Privacy Coordinator, or email your label information and note to privacy@outdoorsg.com

FOR REPRINTS: For Reprints/Eprints or Licensing/Permissions, please contact: Wright's Media — TOLL FREE 1 (877) 652-5295.

FLORIDA SPORTSMAN Vol. #55 Issue #2 (ISSN # 0015-3885). Published monthly by OUTDOOR SPORTSMAN GROUP,
1040 6th Ave., 17th Floor, New York, NY 10018-3703. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices.
POSTMASTER: Send address change (Form 3579) to Florida Sportsman, P.O. Box 37539, Boone, IA 50037-0539.
Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: 500 R. 46 East, Clifton, NJ 07011. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 41405030.

OUTDOOR SPORTSMAN GROUP
PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA

Chief Operating Officer,
Publishing & Branded Media Mike Carney
EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS Derek Sevcik
VP, CONSUMER MARKETING Peter Watt
VP, MANUFACTURING Deb Daniels
SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION
Connie Mendoza
DIRECTOR, PUBLISHING TECHNOLOGY
Kyle Morgan
SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
Tim Neher
DIRECTOR, DIGITAL EDITORIAL Darren Choate
DIGITAL EDITOR, HUNTING Drew Pellman

For questions regarding digital editions, please contact digitalsupport@outdoorsg.com

The Audit Bureau

NATIONAL AD SALES

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR - DETROIT OFFICE
Kevin Donley 248-798-4458

NATIONAL ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE - CHICAGO OFFICE
Carl Benson 312-955-0496

DIRECT RESPONSE ADVERTISING/NON-ENDEMIC
Anthony Smyth 914-409-4202

Copyright 2023 by Outdoor Sportsman Group

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without written permission.

Florida Sportsman® is a registered trademark of Outdoor Sportsman Group in the United States.

The Publisher and authors make no representations or warranties regarding the accuracy, completeness, and timeliness of the information contained in this publication. Any reliance or use of the information is solely at your own risk, and the authors and Publisher disclaim any and all liability relating thereto. Any prices given in this issue were the suggested prices at the press time and are subject to change.

Some advertisements in this magazine may concern products that are not legally for sale to California residents or residents in other jurisdictions.

MEDIA
outdoorsg.com

TELEVISION
outdoorchannel.com
thesportsmanchannel.com
worldfishingnetwork.com

FISHING
bassfan.com
floridasportsman.com
flyfisherman.com
gameandfishmag.com
in-fisherman.com

HUNTING
bowhunter.com
bowhuntingmag.com
gundogmag.com
petersenshunting.com
northamericanwhitetail.com
wildfowlmag.com

SHOOTING
gunsandammo.com
handguns.com
rifleshootermag.com
shootingtimes.com
firearmsnews.com

FishingNosara
The BEST Sportfishing in Costa Rica

*High Quality Boats
*English Speaking Crews
*Professional Tackle
*Costa's Closest Blue Water
*Starting at $750 per person

"I can't tell you how much I enjoyed the trip and will recommend FishingNosara to everyone."
-Frank Bellizio - Tampa

"I have fished around the world, but my number one destination has become Nosara."
-Paul Worthington - Hudson

"What a great trip! I'm an avid fisherman in Florida and the Bahamas, but this blew all of my other trips away."
Paul Reynolds - Winter Park

Daily Fishing reports:
blog.fishingnosara.com

Celebrating 15 years

(904) 591-2161
fishingnosara.com
nosaraparadiserentals.com

FURUNO
Home
Center Vessel
215
ft
584
A
100 yd
NU
3D

Go on a power trip with
FURUNO

Find Your Sweet Spot

Build your own custom, high-resolution Personal Bathymetric Generator (PBG) charts to discover fish-hoarding structure others have missed.

TZT9F
9" Hybrid Touch MFD

TZT12F
12" Hybrid Touch MFD

TZT16F
16" Multi Touch MFD

DFF3D
Multibeam Sonar*
*required for PBG

TZT19F
19" Multi Touch MFD

Discover, map, then fish structure and wrecks in an entirely new way.

- Create maps with PBG & DFF3D 50-100x faster than the competition
- Create shaded relief maps from 10 ft. to 1,000 ft.
- A lifetime of map storage on TZtouch3 MFDs
- Bathymetric mapping up to 3x fishing depth
- Draw contour lines where none exist

NAVnet TZtouch3

Get the whole story at NavNet.com

JEFF WEAKLEY
EDITOR IN CHIEF

FROM THE EDITOR

My Column, More or Less

Trade secret: A little exercise I do, when I'm hunting ideas for this column, is to think of things I'd like to see more of in Florida.

Alternately, I think of things I'd like to see less of.

We're kind of in an age where criticism and pessimism overflow, and so I naturally lean into "more of." I figure all of you, readers, are well-supplied with "less of" topics.

However, this month I have writer's block. So instead of a fully formed column, I'm throwing open the curtain. In no particular order, my brainstorm:

Florida will be in good hands when this generation comes of age. Just give them the tools they need (wheels and reels, to start!) and the space to roam.

MORE: Skateboards and fishing rods
LESS: "No Fishing" signs

MORE: Native green anoles
LESS: Red-headed agamas

MORE: Re-using
LESS: Recycling

MORE: Made in the U.S.A.
LESS: Made in China

MORE: Metal
LESS: Plastic

MORE: Mud
LESS: Pavement

MORE: Horsepower
LESS: Fuel burn
(Yeah... I know)

MORE: Beer
LESS: Inches around my waist
(Man can dream)

MORE: Billfish
LESS: Sharks

MORE: People fishing
LESS: People fishing

MORE: Public hunting land
LESS: "Proposed Zoning Change"

MORE: Seagrass
LESS: Lawn and ag fertilizer

MORE: Sandfleas
LESS (actually make that None): New beach development

MORE: Time to write an actual column
LESS: Tellin' folks how things oughtta be! FS

BLAIR WICKSTROM
SENIOR EDITOR

The Right to Clean and Healthy Water

A WORTHY NEW STATE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT DRIVE TAKES SHAPE.

In Florida, tourism is the largest industry, contributing over $90 billion in direct spending and another $25 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue. You'd expect the state's Chamber of Commerce and Florida Legislature would fight tooth and nail to protect this all-important revenue source.

Well? Like I said, you'd expect they would. Except the sugar and phosphate mining industries pay heavily to keep the water mucked up. "Big Sugar, and the phosphate mining industry spent over $11 million on campaign contributions for the 2022 election cycle, and employed a small army of lobbyists," said Gil Smart, Executive Director of VoteWater.

Clean water is vital for seagrass—which is in turn vital for permit and many other inshore gamefish.

Photo by Adrian Gray

"All of this spending is specifically designed to tilt the playing field in favor of these special interests," Smart said. "And history shows us it works, too."

Coupled with the money generated by a healthy inshore fishery and the fact that there are over 1 million saltwater anglers in the state you'd think we'd have more influence in Tallahassee.

But, sadly we don't.

And right now we have water quality issues statewide. We have fish kills in Southwest Florida, polluted springs in the Northwest, seagrass die-offs in East Central and Southeast Florida, and a starving Everglades and over-salty Florida Bay all directly leading to fewer fish and fewer fishing dollars.

It's time for our lawmakers to act and the 2023 legislative session begins March 7. But I wouldn't hold your breath for any meaningful legislation addressing these issues.

We may have to bypass our lawmakers altogether.

We'll have to create law by changing the state constitution via the petition process. It's hard work, but we've done it before. In 1994 we did it with the Save our Sealife amendment. The Net Ban. Anglers hand-collected over 400,000 signed petitions and overnight changed the way our state fisheries were managed.

In 1996 Floridians again bypassed the state legislature and got three habitat-saving amendments passed. Amendment Four added a one-cent per pound fee on sugar. Amendment Five was the Everglades Forever Act, and Amendment Six brought us the Everglades Trust Fund.

And then in 2014, the Florida Water and Land Conservation Initiative was passed in an effort to force the state to buy critically important conservation lands. The very funding mechanism that can re-create the River of Grass.

It's time yet again for citizens to do the work our state legislators choose to ignore.

We need the Right to Clean and Healthy Waters written into the state constitution.

Considering everything at stake for Floridians if we lose clean water, this should be as fundamental as the pursuit of happiness or the ability to defend life or property.

"We need to act quickly," said Karl Diegert, Chairman of Florida Right to Clean Water. "In order to amend the state constitution, the first step is getting the Florida Supreme Court to review the wording. To get there we need to collect 223,000 signatures, spread across 14 congressional districts, by March 1, 2023. And to qualify for the 2024 ballot, we'll need 892,000 signatures by November 30, 2023."

This isn't going to be easy—an understatement.

So, let's get going. If you're not familiar with the effort, begin by reading more about the Right to Clean and Healthy Water amendment in this issue's Conservation Front, page 24. Then, for those of you registered to vote in Florida, print and sign the petition form and send it to the Fort Myers address listed at left. You can also scan the QR code (shown left) and print and send in the document.

Readers of this magazine helped change the state constitution by banning gill and entanglement nets larger than 500 square feet. We saved countless fish. Now we need to amend the constitution to restore and protect the habitat our fish need to survive.

Please sign and send, while getting at least one other registered voter to do the same.

The clock is ticking. FS

CTA

SIGN AND SEND
Right to Clean and Healthy Water
amendment petition:
Print the form at
floridarighttocleanwater.org, fill out
and send it to:

Florida Right to Clean Water
13300 S. Cleveland Ave,
Suite 56
Ft. Myers, FL 33907

AMERICAN CRUISE LINES
TENNESSEE
Memphis
Tunica
Helena
ARKANSAS
MISSISSIPPI
Greenville
Vicksburg
Natchez
LOUISIANA
St. Francisville
Baton Rouge
Houmas House
Oak Alley
New Orleans

CRUISE CLOSE TO HOME®

on the Mighty Mississippi River

This extraordinary adventure along the legendary Mississippi begins the moment you step aboard our fleet of new American Riverboats. With fewer than 200 guests on board, you will explore local treasures and historic ports along the most storied river in America.

Small Ship Cruising Done Perfectly®

Call

888-344-2009

to request a

★ FREE ★

Cruise Guide

FREE
BAG OF ICE
LB. ZONE
NET WT. 10 lbs. (4.5 Kg)

COLD STARTS
One essential part of the prep day is getting your fishbox chilled and ready for action. Cubed ice or partially filled bottles (to be frozen, right) do the trick. Below right are some varieties of coolers for drinks, catches, bait and backup.

The Day Before

Make the time to get the freshest bait, pre-chill your fishbox and forge a strategy.

BY RICK RYALS

Any good football coach will tell you that their games are not won or lost on game day. They are won or lost during “two-a-days” in August when the best teams push a little harder. The truth is, it’s the preparation before any sporting event that usually determines who wins and loses. Offshore fishing is no different.

After spending days watching the weather patterns, my “day before” will start with a stop at the busiest bait and tackle store around. If there’s a chance we’ll be trolling, I want to make sure we have the freshest ballyhoo I can get. Why the busiest shop? The faster the tackle shop turns its ballyhoo, the less time it spends in the freezer. Please do not ever buy your ballyhoo from a shop that won’t give you access to their bait freezers. Remember orange tips on tails and beaks, and clear eyes absolutely make a difference. Always select the freshest looking packages you can find. If it’s kingfish season, and you’re planning on pulling live pogies or sardines, you’d better grab a box of cigar minnows for backup. If we’ll be catching live bait tomorrow, I’ll stock up on the best-quality sabiki rigs.

Next I will start the search for cuttlefish. We may end up bottom fishing if the trolling is slow, and nothing is better for vermilions, sea bass and triggerfish than cuttlefish. In Mayport, cuttlefish are caught by shrimpers, and they show up at different tackle shops, only when the shrimpers are dragging.

My last stop in my morning “day before” run is at an ice machine. I learned from ice guru Paul Kabalin from Engel Coolers. He’s a genius at ice management, and he says to keep a fishbox cold all day, you must start out with a cold fish box. I’ll take a 20-pound bag, and put it in my fishbox the day before. I can keep my fish iced perfectly all day on 40 pounds if I put a sacrificial 20-pound bag in the day before.

It’s time for a game plan. If the weather forecast is perfect, I’ll plan an early start and run the 68 miles to our 28-fathom ledge. If it’s May, or early June, I don’t need my GPS book. We’re going looking for rips and temperature breaks, and we will devote the whole day to finding mahi, and tuna. If it’s any other time of year, I’ll take the time to lay out a game plan with backups.

If the weather has been rough, and reports few, I’ll try to start trolling the break near some good bottom numbers. If the water and bites are not to my liking, we’ll be pulling on triggerfish and vermilions before the sun is high. If our initial goal is to catch bottom fish, and the weather has been bad, my plan will have us starting on spots that are public knowledge. I won’t want to hit secret spots unless I need them. If the public spots haven’t been hit because of a two week nor’easter, there’s a chance the fish have accumulated on spots that I wouldn’t normally spend time on.

On days when we’re going to be live bait trolling, I’ll make sure to get the word on where the bait is hanging out, and what they were acting like. If the schools are staying in the same place, we’re going to plan an early start, and try to be among the first boats on the bait. If the schools are on the move, I’ll make sure my backup plans are ready. I have to be sure if we can’t catch bait, our day isn’t ruined.

Speaking of live bait trolling, Captain Roger Walker is one of the best tournament kingfish fishermen I know. I know at least one of his tournament wins came on a day that the small kings, bonito, and sharks were wide open. Roger was able to pick his way through the weeds because he had 96 double hook pogy rigs ready. He needed all of them.

If we’re going to be natural bait trolling, the rest of my “day before” will be tied up getting a load of ballyhoo, mullet and bonito strips ready. I love pulling strips. I’d like them all to be fresh, but if they’re frozen, I’ll defrost them and put a good brine on them, to toughen them up overnight, and maybe put a little shine back on the skin. I always try to rig more baits than I think we’ll need. Think about it. A good day’s fishing may last 13 hours, but I’ll bet the bites come in short frenzies. You want to see me lose my mind? Let us be in a school of nice mahi, eating like dogs, and have us only be pulling two lines because we’re waiting for somebody to rig more baits.

I think the old saying “You get out of something, what you put in it” is true. It’s not about skill or secret weapons. It’s about being more than prepared when that 4:30 a.m. alarm goes off. FS

THE GREAT OFFSHORE
GARMIN
YAMAHA

Get ready for offshore action with ultimate fishability, serious comfort and performance at every turn. Build your Regulator from 23-41 feet at **regulatormarine.com**

powered by YAMAHA

REGULATOR
the offshore life

regulatormarine.com | 252.482.3837 | Edenton, NC | @regulatormarine

Bright Ideas for Boaters

Four (of many) innovations that caught our eye at the Fort Lauderdale Boat Show.

BY GEORGE LABONTE BOATING EDITOR

The Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show in late October delivered plenty of new and exciting technology. Here are four of the top innovations I saw there.

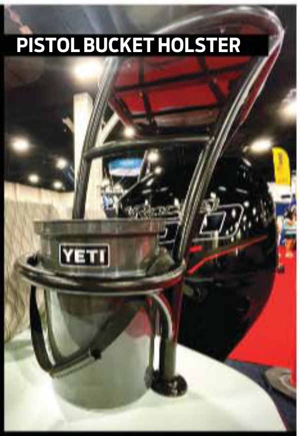
SEAKEEPER RIDE

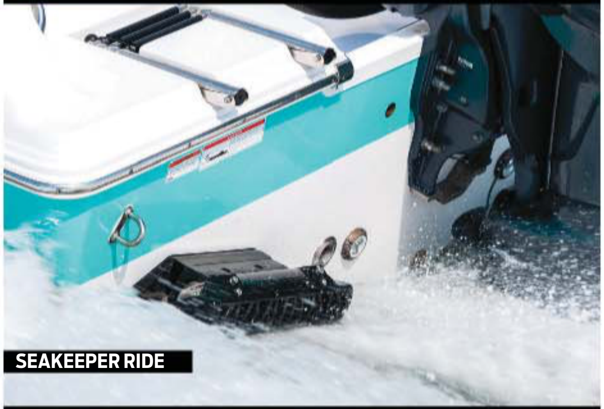
I've always approached with skepticism any new technology that promises "automatic" control of basic helm functions. Whether it's autopilot, auto functioning joystick controls, or auto trim tabs, I favor AUTOnomy over AUTOmatic. My main concern is that I know I'm more capable of making decisions regarding the operation of a vessel than a gadget with limited ability to react in real time to rapidly changing conditions. A good example of this is the use of automatic trim tabs. With the sole mission of keeping your vessel's bow down and the boat level to the horizon, what the auto tab function doesn't take into consideration is the oncoming large boat wake that your trimmed down bow will disintegrate, soaking everyone onboard. All it seeks to accomplish is maintaining a level attitude.

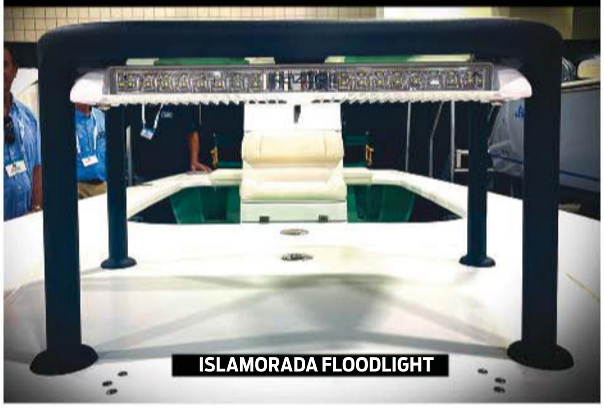
With this in mind, I approached a sea trial to test the new Seakeeper Ride system with my usual raised eyebrow. Upon pressing the "activate" button, I rudely proceeded to try to get the passengers wet by turning into every wave I could cross at the worst possible angle, wanting to see the Ride system as another "gadget." Despite my best efforts, I couldn't make it happen.

The system's inertial sensing hardware and software recognize how the boat attitude is constantly changing across the water on all three axes. Appropriate and instant commands to the transom-mounted rotary blade units correct any disruption and counteract excessive pitch, roll, and yaw. Adjustment calculations are relayed to the rotary blades at a rate that is hard to comprehend (100 adjustments per second). The experience is on par with turning over the controls to a very capable helmsman. Seakeeper is the same company which produces gyrostabilizers for vessels. The new transom-mounted Ride system, which uses different technology, starts at $4,500. The Ride and gyro may be installed on the same boat. See more at www.ride.seakeeper.com

SIONYX NIGHTWAVE


PISTOL BUCKET HOLSTER


SEAKEEPER RIDE


ISLAMORADA FLOODLIGHT

SIONYX NIGHTWAVE

For 2023, Sionyx introduced a new system, the Nightwave Marine Navigational Camera. This device allows you to view the darkness ahead of you on your boat's multifunction display. The patented CMOS sensor amplifies every bit of available light under the darkest of conditions and relays the illuminated image to the screen. It's convenient and very effective, I've found.

Spending a couple of hours with the Nightwave on a nearly moonless night, I watched the Simrad screen render a view ahead not unlike seeing in daylight with sunglasses on. A traditional GPS plotter, with a background marine chart (you have updated yours this year, right?), shows only known fixed markers and landmasses. The Nightwave camera brings into view the unforeseen hazards such as relocated markers, shifting sandbars, floating hazardous debris, or more importantly an unlit vessel or person swimming. MSRP $1,595. www.sionyx.com

ISLAMORADA FLOODLIGHT

Still need a spotlight for occasional corrections when navigating at night? Islamorada Boatworks has devised an ingenious solution on their new Morada 18. The boat features a forward casting platform with a recessed Lumitec Razor LED Bar spotlight installed on the underside. The position prevents glare aimed back into the cockpit while bathing the oncoming water with bright white light. It's controlled with a flipper switch on the steering wheel that can be used as a momentary switch to check for reflective markers ahead or monitor for hazards. This switch eliminates the need for unsafely taking your eyes off the water to look at your switch panel. www.islamoradaboatworks.com

CONCH PISTOL BUCKET HOLSTER

Skiff storage compartments offer only the space necessary for safety equipment and a few tackle items or incidentals. A five-gallon bucket? Tough to store—but of course infinitely useful. Conch Boats cleverly incorporated a pair of bucket "holsters" on the new 18 Pistol model. By using the space around the poling platform where the rungs to climb onto the platform are located, they brilliantly shaped the step-up into a hoop on either side that will accommodate a bucket (out of the way) within easy reach. Is it revolutionary? No. Is it as simply brilliant as changing one bend on an existing piece of hardware we've had for years to offer exceptional convenience for small boaters? Absolutely. www.conchboats.com FS

MAKING YOUR BOAT

BETTER THAN IT'S EVER BEEN

BRING IT BACK TO LIFE

You and your boat have seen miles of sunny days on the water, waves, storms, fish, and more. It's brought you back more times than you can remember and that is why now is the time to repower those worn out engines and make your craft better than ever. With Suzuki Marine's wide selection of Suzuki Dealers and Factory Trained Technicians, you can be assured that your Suzuki repower is going to make memories that will last for years to come.

SUZUKI MARINE

SUZUKI MARINE 5 YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY

5 YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY applies to qualifying purchases of Suzuki outboard motors sold and delivered to the retail purchaser, for pleasure (non-commercial) use only, from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2023. See Suzuki Limited Warranty for additional details. Suzuki, the "S" logo, and Suzuki model and product names are Suzuki Trademarks or ®. Don't drink and drive. Always wear a USCG-approved life jacket and read your owner's manual. © 2022 Suzuki Marine USA, LLC. All rights reserved.

Larry Wright, a guide on Lake Okeechobee, prepares to add another shellcracker to the cooler. Joining in: Mayan cichlids and bluegills.

Redear or Not...

It's shellcracker season in Florida.

BY JOE SUROVIEC

Quietly slipping the bell anchor over the gunnel, I allowed for some slack to escape and tied the rope to the cleat. As the boat settled into place, I could just make out about 50 basketball-sized cleared out depressions—the beds of redear sunfish, what we Florida anglers call shellcracker.

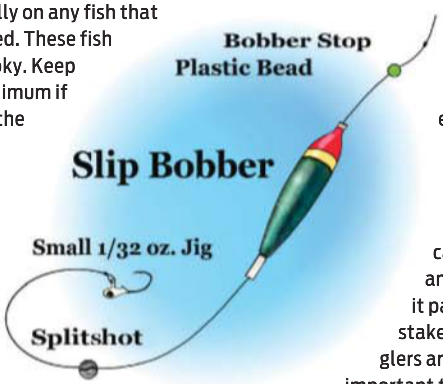
I watched my slip bobber lightly hit the surface and immediately it disappeared. I raised the rod with a sharp upward motion and was fast to a beautiful shellcracker which bulldogged into some vegetation, dove under the boat and then circled a few times before reaching the ice box. A process that can happen 25 times until the legal limit is reached.

Shellcrackers are known for their ability to crush up and consume mollusks that grow on the lake bottom. For the fisherman, crickets or a small piece of worm are both equally effective baits. The fish also take tiny Beetle Spins or small jigs with plastic bodies (white, silver or gray work best).

Shellcrackers tend to run larger than bluegill, but the two may create their saucer shaped depressions in the same areas, making it a mixed bag for the panfish angler. Shellcrackers can get to be into the 3-pound range on a premier lake such as Okeechobee. Here, the average size is around 12 inches and a pound and a quarter for a "good one." The spawning season begins early in southern Florida—starting in late February and going into July, waves of fish come in from the main lake and set up shop. The moon phases control quite a bit of the nest building and spawning and the fish are usually doing their thing for a week or so.

I prefer a light spinning outfit with 8-pound-test main line and a section of 6-pound fluorocarbon used at the business end of my rig. Shallow water is usually clear, so keeping your rigs light will increase your bites, especially on any fish that have been pressured. These fish are extremely spooky. Keep boat noise to a minimum if you want to catch the bigger fish. Always try and fish quietly without a lot of banging around.

I prefer slip bobber setups for this type of fishing mainly because it is an easy thing to set up the exact depth you need to present your bait at. The clamp-on type bobbers will work but make a more pronounced splash when hitting the water and after a few adjustments on depth, the line memory curls and just looks bad so I opt for the slip bobbers. Just above the bottom works best as most fish will be on their guard watching for intruders in or near their nests.



Tiny jigs work great. Tip with bait and fish under a slip bobber.

It may take a few bobber adjustments before you hit the right depth for instant hits. The slip bobber allows you to quickly adjust the depth by raising or lowering the line stop. Although a hook and splitshot take untold numbers, I prefer to use a small 1/32-ounce jig. The jigs work great. They pull the light line down to the bobber stop easily. Jigs also result in fewer fish swallowing hooks, usually catching in the jaw area.

Shellcrackers are not only strong fighters, but they are delicious. The limit is 25 per person so you can really put a fish fry together with a couple anglers in the boat.

Where I fish on Lake Okeechobee, cichlids are mixed in with the shellcrackers and grow to battle size. If you think you have a bass hooked, most likely it is a cichlid. These exotic fishes are tasty and go right into the ice chest; a few channel cats might join them.

A few final notes: Location is a very important piece of the puzzle and it pays to have a few places staked out in case other anglers are in "your spot." It's also important to keep the catches cool. Take an extra bag of ice or some frozen jugs with you in case you get on them good and get a limit of these fish. Panko breadcrumbs in an egg wash dip with Mrs. Dash, salt and pepper, is how I prefer the fillets cooked. If you want to target the great panfishing on Lake Okeechobee, and you're totally new to the fishery, stop in at a local bait and tackle shop for supplies and intel. Most places will gladly give you information that leads you to a successful fishing trip. I usually call Leif or Larry at Garrard's Bait and Tackle in Okeechobee to get the updates on that fishery. Support your local shops! FS

CONTENDER
GARMIN

HOW TO TAKE FIRST
WHEN YOUR WORLD CHANGES EVERY SECOND.

When it's all on the line and the stakes are high, you have to be ready for anything.
That's why Contender Boats are built to give you an edge in moments like this.
And it's why we obsess over every detail. It's not just the right way, it's the only way.
Because to us, this is more than just fishing.

DRIVEN FOR WHAT'S IN THE WATER
contenderboats.com

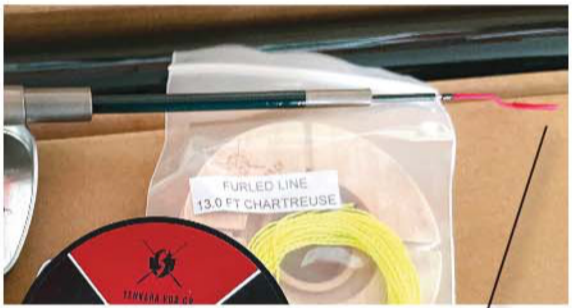
POWERED BY YAMAHA

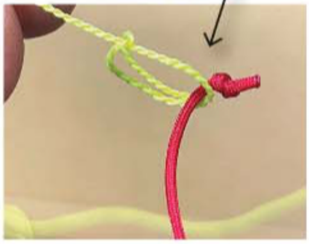
A flyrod without a reel? It's a canepole, basically. But, it's also a heckuva lot of fun!

Tenkara Business

BY JEFF WEAKLEY

Tenkara rods are collapsible poles anywhere from 4 to 16 feet in length. They are designed to be fished with a short length of line and traditional trout flies. There is no reel seat, no eyes, just a long, flexible pole. Hook something really big, and you'll rely on your own persuasive touch to bring the fish to hand. It's simple. And exciting!





Furled line hitched to the lillian; tippet will be tied to the terminal end. For vertical fishing, a straight piece of monofilament may be used. Top: Tilapia among writer's recent catches.

This winter, Tenkara Rod Co. shipped me the Teton Zoom kit ($245) for "Florida Man" evaluation. It comes with a 13-foot furled running line, a spool of 6-pound-test leader, and a small box of generic wet flies.

Assembling the rod was no problem for Florida Man. The carbon fiber sections telescope out like the fiberglass crappie poles we buy at tackle shops all around Florida. One difference. Instead of a ring to tie your line off, the rod terminates in a thin red nylon line, or lillian, about 2 inches in length.

How to affix the running line?

I pulled up a few videos on YouTube: Tie an overhand knot in the lillian, near the end, to form a stopper. Now look at the furled nylon line. Notice it has a stitched loop in one end, a tiny metal eyelet in the other. The metal eye is for attaching your leader. The stitched loop is for connecting to the rod. Catch a pinch of the running line and pull it through the stitched loop, forming a hitch. Secure this over the red line and pull it tight, seating it against the knot. It's strong, supple and replaceable.

Now to attach the leader. First thing to do is, find the eyelet that's installed on the line. Look close, it's tiny. Cut it off and throw it away. Maybe there was some factory defect in my kit, but try as I might, I could not get any strength out of a leader knot to that eye. I tried several different knots, various kinds of leader material and half a dictionary of epithets before I concluded the damn eyelet was cutting it!

Anyway, I got rid of the eyelet and used a uni-nail knot to connect about four feet of 6-pound monofilament directly to the line. Plenty strong.

To show I'm a good sport, I tied on one of the soft-hackle wet flies included in the kit. These patterns are great on flowing trout streams—you let them drift or sweep with the current like aquatic insects at either end of their life cycles: Dying after mating, or emerging from nymphal forms. In a still, blackwater lake, not so useful. You need something that either floats, like a popper, or gets down, like a jig.

The day was cold. Standing on the shore of my backyard lake, I thought of crappie jigs. I picked out a white/chartreuse tube jig. I added a tiny float 2 feet up the leader: a ½-inch Thingamabobber. Fly fishermen call it a strike indicator. Here in Florida, it's a bobber. Any old panfish float will do.

With a pond-worthy setup, I found the Teton Zoom a delight to cast. It is much lighter and better-balanced than the bargain-rack crappie poles. You can fish and text your friends at the same time.

With the rod fully telescoped to 12 feet (it can also be fished in a 10.5-foot, abbreviated form), 13 feet of running line and 4 feet of leader, the reach was impressive. Pitch the jig and bobber out along shoreline vegetation, let it sit, then twitch with the rodtip. In my first 20 minutes, I landed two bass, a good shellcracker and about a 2-pound tilapia. Entertaining, to say the least.

The next day, I left off the furled line and just hitched a piece of 6-pound leader to the lillian, converting the tenkara into a straight canepole. Five or six feet of leader is perfect for dapping in pads for bluegill, shellcracker and crappie.

The pole collapses into a 26-inch travel tube perfect for stowing in a backpack, travel bag, your desk, under a carseat, pretty much anywhere.

Drawbacks? On a recent trip I lost patience trying to free a stuck tip ferrule and snapped it. Good news is it's $20 to replace a section, and the rods are made so you can pull the sections out the back. Also: The Tenkara Rod Co. guys suggest pulling the sections through your fingers as you rig up the pole, adding some natural non-stick. FS

GARMIN
273CC

FUN ON THE WATER DOESN'T HAVE TO COME AT A HIGH COST.

ZPLANE
HULL DESIGN

BUILD YOUR
STINGRAY TODAY!

With Stingray, you can get the best boat for the best price, and save money over the lifetime of your boat. Saving money starts at the fuel pump. Our revolutionary high-performance, fuel-saving Z-Plane hull design is built into our entire value-priced lineup, providing you the opportunity for more fun on the water with your friends and family.

STINGRAYBOATS.COM

Models shown with options. Consult your local dealer for the latest information on available options and pricing.

POWERED BY
YAMAHA GARMIN.

STINGRAY Boats
Legendary performance. Unsurpassed value.

Scouting for Spring Turkeys

BY TIM L. LEWIS

Hog rootings provide spring turkeys with ideal substrate for scratching.

Don't wander blindly when the season opens next month. Have a game plan, know where to go.

Throughout most of the year turkeys can be found in almost any wild Florida habitat, from wide-open pastures to thick secondary growths or swamp woods. I've bumped into them in spots where seeing a yard ahead presented difficulties and had big gobblers flatten themselves so effectively that they resembled nothing more than cow patties in coverless pastures. While this wide range of frequented terrains persists into spring, their breeding habits predict where the largest percentage of birds can be found and help direct the savvy hunter to scout the likeliest places.

Breeding season, of course is accompanied by strutting, drumming gobblers. For the ostentatious displays to be appreciated by hens, visibility is a requisite. Also, to be bred, hens need toms to see and find them. Therefore, open terrain with a wide visage and an abundant food source proves attractive. Concurrently, the showiness and preoccupation of the gobblers increases the vulnerability of the birds to predators like coyotes and bobcats and even foxes. To counter this problem, areas lacking intermittent and interlacing areas of cover are preferred.

Knowledge of these three factors—extensive visibility, adequate food, and reduced predator cover—can steer the spring gobbler hunter toward scouting and selecting the most likely sites for success. Finding open areas can be facilitated by scanning aerial photographs, covering ground on foot or vehicle, or personal familiarity with the land. Food in the spring often takes the form of young buds, shoots, and insects. Areas of hog rootings are prime food sources. Turkey feeding in the rootings leave sign in the form of tracks, droppings, and marks from scratching for insects.

> Two other considerations help **hunters pinpoint likely locations:** roosts and travel routes.

Two other considerations help hunters pinpoint likely locations: roosts and travel routes. Turkeys roost in nearly every type of tree that affords them nightly protection including oaks, maples, elm, and gum. In my region, cypress and, most especially, pines are preferred in the spring. The spring roosts most often border either the expanses the turkeys are using or an open fly-down area that connects with the expanses.

Other locales may show different predilections, but in Central Florida, gobblers gravitate strongly to tall pines. Turkeys may roost in the same general area several nights in a row or select entirely different roosting trees depending on food and water.

Eight years ago, I recall watching a group of hens and a few attending gobblers spend the night in a stand of cypress and pines encompassing no more than an acre for nine nights in a row. Then, they roosted four or five hundred yards north for two nights, only to return to the original spot for three more nights. Knowing roost sites allows a hunter to check potential locales the evening before the hunt, or to listen in the predawn for morning yelps or gobbles, or, for those who use blinds, to preset them in productive locations.

Travel routes are generally narrow places that lie between open feeding areas. Examples include the points of cypress heads, gaps between cypress heads, thin places in creek bottoms, manmade crossings, low spots on dikes, or even firebreaks. Each region may provide great places for calling or for blind placement.

Obviously, heavily hunted birds may seek thicker, safer cover, and, on hot days, the birds may feed under the shade of the swamp wood canopy, but early in the spring season, attention to their parade grounds can prove rewarding to the turkey hunter. FS

Shhhhh. No wake zone.
Marlin

Protect your baby (and their toys) with coverage for fishing gear and personal property too.
1-800-PROGRESSIVE / PROGRESSIVE.COM

PROGRESSIVE®

Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. & affiliates. Additional charge may apply. Prices vary based on how you buy.

Homemade Venison Backstrap Pizza

Adding a layer of sliced venison atop fresh ingredients not only makes this homemade pizza super flavorful but also creates a truly nutritious meal.

Enjoy a wild slice that's full of flavor.

BY MAGGIE ROSAINE

You cannot overcook venison backstrap and still expect it to taste OK. It should be rare, tender, and moist. So, here's the trick when using it as a pizza topping—remove the pizza from the oven before it is fully cooked, arrange the backstrap slices and return to the oven for 5 minutes. Keep a close eye, allowing the venison to sear but stay rare on the inside. It's really quite delicious!

One day when I did not have any pizza sauce, I resorted to using fresh salsa. Now, I've been doing it this way ever since. If you have neither sauce nor salsa, chop up any tomatoes you have on hand, slice some chili peppers, add a splash of olive oil, salt and pepper, then mix and let it sit at room temperature for 30 minutes. There's your sauce! FS

Galbani
MOZZARELLA CHEESE
CALIFORNIA SUN-DRY

INGREDIENTS

½ lb. venison backstrap

½ cup soy sauce (reduced sodium)

1 tbsp. brown sugar (optional)

16 oz. pizza dough

2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil

1 cup salsa

1 cup red onions, chopped

1 cup sweet peppers, sliced

1 cup mushrooms, sliced

2 tbsp. sun-dried tomatoes, chopped

8 oz. fresh mozzarella, sliced

Slice venison diagonally into ¼ inch thick slices and marinate in soy sauce and brown sugar for 2 hours.

When you are ready to cook, preheat the pizza stone in the oven to 450 degrees. After letting the pizza dough relax, sprinkle cornmeal on a wooden pizza board and roll out the dough to about a 16-inch round. Brush olive oil evenly then spread fresh salsa. Sprinkle onions, peppers, mushrooms, and sun-dried tomatoes. Top with fresh mozzarella slices. Do not overload the pizza with too many toppings.

Gently slide the pizza onto the preheated stone and cook for about 20 minutes (time will vary depending on the thickness of the crust. I like a medium thick crust).

So, when is it done? When the crust looks a little browned and the cheese has melted. Slide the pizza board under the crust and gently lift to see if it's golden underneath. If the bottom is white, you are looking at a doughy pizza. Keep cooking.

Remove the pizza from the oven and then place venison evenly (drain soy sauce first) taking care not to overlap. Return to the oven for about 5 minutes until the venison is seared. Start slicing with a wheel the moment the pizza is taken out of the oven. It's ready to serve and best enjoyed piping hot!

CLARITY
HAS REACHED
A NEW PEAK.

HUMMINBIRD
Chart
N-Up
ENGINE
RPM
2150
RPM
2100
PSI
14.8
PSI
15.3
°F
145.0
°F
142.3
gal
28.0
Trim
150-220 kHz
APEX 19

SHARPEN YOUR VIEW WITH THE WATER'S **APEX**™ PREDATOR.

Welcome to the top. The APEX™ Series showcases the clearest sonar imaging on the sharpest multi-function display the water has ever seen. Industry-leading MEGA Imaging® and Dual Spectrum CHIRP sonar come standard, with even more performance from a dedicated sonar channel for accessory transducers up to 2kW. See it all clearly with a full-HD touchscreen, and add the power of the One-Boat Network™ for unrivaled control of your vessel. Find out if you're Type APEX at **Humminbird.com/APEX**.

APEX 19
APEX 16
APEX 13

HUMMINBIRD

© 2022 Johnson Outdoors Marine Electronics, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

A Watershed Moment

Scan the QR code or go online to www.floridarighttocleanwater.org to see full text of amendment and print copy of petition.

Inside a new grassroots constitutional amendment campaign to give Floridians a right to clean water.

BY NATALIE VAN HOOSE

Waiting on Florida politicians to fix water quality issues?

"It's a tactic that has failed for decades," said Joseph Bonasia, communications director for Florida Right to Clean Water.

Bonasia, a resident of Cape Coral, and a growing number of other visionaries have a new solution. They're urging Florida voters to bypass the state legislature and amend the state constitution to give Floridians a fundamental right to clean and healthy water. This, Bonasia says, would allow citizens, nonprofits, and other entities to hold the state accountable for harm it inflicts on Florida waterways.

The goal, supporters say, is to restore and protect Florida's water so that it's safe for drinking, swimming, and fishing for generations to come.

"Water is absolutely vital to the interests of all Floridians: our quality of life, our local economies, our health, and the wildlife that we cherish," Bonasia said. "It merits the kind of protection that we can provide it if we have a fundamental constitutional right to clean and healthy waters."

More than 60 Florida organizations and groups support the amendment. [*Blair Wickstrom, Florida Sportsman Senior Editor and longtime advocate for clean water initiatives, gives his take in this month's "Call to Action," p. 10*]

About 892,000 registered Florida voters must sign a petition by November 30, 2023 to qualify the amendment as a ballot initiative in November 2024. The Florida Right to Clean Water campaign aims to collect about 223,000 of those signatures by March 1, 2023. This would trigger a review by the Florida Supreme Court.

We talked to Bonasia, campaign coordinator Mel Martin, and Florida water and law experts to better understand the Right to Clean Water initiative.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER AMENDMENT?

The amendment would elevate clean water from a matter of state policy to a constitutional right of Floridians on the same level as other fundamental political rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to bear arms, Bonasia said. This means the state could be sued if it violates this right, whether through action or inaction.

The amendment defines clean and healthy waters as "safe for native fish and wildlife and human recreation," safe for drinking where applicable, and able to support "thriving populations and diverse communities of native fish and wildlife."

It also protects natural water flow patterns and requires recharging ground and underground water sources. This would cover a notable gap in the federal Clean Water Act, which prevents direct water pollution, but does not safeguard water supply, according to legal expert Erin Ryan, Florida State

University's Elizabeth C. and Clyde W. Atkinson professor and associate dean for environmental programs.

"That didn't used to be so much of an issue," Ryan said. "But especially in Florida, we have redirected waters. We pump groundwater out of aquifers that may or may not be even covered by the Clean Water Act. One of the challenges for Florida… is that it's not just waters being polluted; it's that water is being withdrawn and not making it to the waterway at all."

The Right to Clean Water constitutional amendment would trump state legislation if passed— legislators could not preempt or undo this kind of action. The amendment would also be self-executing. This means that if voters ratify the amendment in 2024, it would automatically go into effect without additional action by the state government.

HOW WOULD THE AMENDMENT WORK?

A person, corporation, nonprofit, or other entity could sue the state for harming water by introducing pathogens, contaminants, or toxins or disrupting natural water flow, processes, or functions.

Under the current legal system, a Florida citizen can sue the state for polluting or for violating a permit. But if the state issues a permit to a corporation or other entity to pollute or degrade a waterway, "a lawsuit cannot do much," Bonasia said. "Under this amendment, however, permits that go against Floridians' fundamental right to clean, healthy water could be grounds for a lawsuit. A court could order such a permit to be rescinded."

Bonasia provided several examples of what the amendment could look like in action: The amendment could be used to stop the state from allowing drainage of ecologically sensitive wetlands. It could compel the state to adopt recommendations from its Blue-Green Algae Task Force. It could halt withdrawals from the Florida aquifer that threaten the state's water supply. And it could prevent a state-permitted developer from creating a subdivision with a septic-based sewage system that would leak pollutants into the Indian River Lagoon.

WHAT ABOUT CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS?

Whether or not they agree on the solution to Florida's water problems, leaders of water-oriented groups generally concur that the status quo isn't working.

"Florida has environmental laws that are not being enforced," said environmental attorney Justin Bloom. "If they were enforced, that would go a long way to address some of our environmental issues."

Bloom, who is also the founder and a board member of the environmental nonprofit Suncoast Waterkeeper, attributed the absence of consistent law enforcement to the political influence of lobbyists and special interests and the lack of sufficient staffing and funding for the Department of Environmental Protection.

As a result, Suncoast and Tampa Bay Waterkeepers have filed lawsuits under the federal Clean Water Act to hold Florida government agencies accountable to their own standards. Two recent cases against Sarasota County and the city of Bradenton were successfully settled out of court and resulted in the county and city investigating and upgrading their sewage collection systems to comply with the law. But these examples beg the question of why the responsibility of water law enforcement is falling to Florida citizens.

"The current regulatory framework in Florida simply is not working," said John Cassani of Calusa Waterkeeper, a supporter of the amendment. "The Right to Clean Water, if adopted by the electorate, would make it easier to attain standing for legal petitions aimed at compliance with Florida water law."

WOULD IT TRIGGER A FLOOD OF LAWSUITS?

It's difficult to say for sure, but it's worth noting that states that have passed similar so-called "green amendments," such as New York, Montana, and Pennsylvania, have not experienced a proliferation of lawsuits. The contention that green amendments will create endless litigation "is factually unfounded," environmental attorney Todd Ommen wrote in a recent American Bar Association article. "The effect of [green amendments] has been studied, and the results unambiguously show that the feared flood is barely a trickle."

Bonasia believes few lawsuits would be necessary for the state and the DEP to begin moving toward better decision-making by default. The amendment also requires that the person or entity bringing the lawsuit must be in the "zone of interest" of the perceived harm and demonstrate that the state's actions or inaction hurt them in some way.

WOULD THE AMENDMENT BE BAD FOR BUSINESS?

Campaign coordinator Mel Martin, a native of Seminole County, said the amendment encourages business models that comply with a minimum requirement of not polluting Florida waters. She sees the amendment as a step toward stewardship and fiscal responsibility.

"In the long run, you're saving not just unnecessary cleanup costs and restoration project costs, but you're also protecting the return on investment and the economic prosperity that comes from clean water," she said.

Full text of the amendment: floridarighttocleanwater.org. FS

Florida Clean Water In Hindsight

HOW MIGHT FLORIDA be different today, had this amendment been added to the state constitution 10 years ago? Joseph Bonasia furnished a few examples where officials might have been compelled to address pollution.

St. Johns River: Officials determined that the middle "basin" of the famous north-flowing St. Johns River suffered from excess nitrogen and phosphorous, contributing to blue-green algae blooms. They made action plans for this sector—but not for the upper basin, where 95-percent of the nutrients come from!

Lake Okeechobee: In 2020, Florida updated plans to address nutrient overload on the Big O and manmade drainages (Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie canals). But, they skipped a major source, what's termed "legacy nutrients" found in muck that might be removed, if officials would only prioritize it.

Tampa Bay: The release of 215 million gallons of polluted water from Piney Point, and the subsequent supercharged red tides, could have been prevented; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had warned of the scenario as far back as 2008.

Offshore Patrol

Conservation on the high seas requires specialized vessels and determined officers. Here's a look at the Fish and Wildlife Commission's OPV Program.

BY STEVE WAYNE

FWC photo showing some of the offshore vessels involved in resource protection, search-and-rescue and other assignments.

You're fishing 12 miles off the coast of Florida when you notice a large 65-foot patrol boat heading in your direction. "Is it the Coast Guard?" No. "Is it the Sheriff's Office?" No, too far out. "How about a local police department marine unit?" Not a chance. "How about the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)?" Yes, it is! "Does the FWC even have jurisdiction in federal waters?" Yes, they do. The large patrol vessel is part the FWC's Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Program.

One of FWC's primary responsibilities is to conduct state and federal fishery enforcement. The FWC accomplishes this through its OPV Program. The OPV Program consists of 13 vessels, ranging in size from three different classes of vessels strategically stationed around the state.

Heavy Endurance Class Offshore Patrol Vessels are vessels 50 feet or greater in length and are capable of extended patrol in offshore areas during varying weather conditions. These vessels have berthing and support facilities and equipment to enable them to operate on multi-day missions without returning to port.

Endurance Class Offshore Patrol Vessels are vessels 38 feet or greater in length. These vessels have enclosed cabins and accommodations to support extended patrols in offshore waters during varying weather

OCEAN~TAMER®
MARINE BEAN BAGS

Tournament tested, professionally proven!
The most versatile & comfortable marine seating product available.

Come see us at the Miami International Boat Show Booth MB6085

Quality, Comfort & Style
- Available in 3 sizes, 4 styles, and 32 colors
- 100% Marine Grade Materials
- Waterproof, UV & Mildew Resistant
- Lifetime Warranty
- Made in the USA

OCEAN-TAMER.COM
1-800-804-0314

Find us on Facebook

MENTION THIS AD AND RECEIVE 10% OFF
CODE: FLORIDASPORTSMAN

"I FLY"
Fly Rod Holders

THE ONLY FLY ROD HOLDER YOU WILL EVER HAVE TO BUY

Lifetime Warranty
Corrosion Resistant
Fixed Single & Multiples
Suction Cup & Rail Mounts
Kayak Mounts
Boga Buddy & Fly Trap

DEVELOPED FOR FLY FISHERMEN BY FLY FISHERMEN

CAN BE MOUNTED VERTICALLY OR HORIZONTALLY

Ask at your local fly shop or visit our online store at www.iflyrodholders.com or scan the tag below

FISHING SOLUTIONS
508-528-4898

conditions. They do not have berthing for each crew member.

Intermediate Class Offshore Patrol Vessels are capable of short-duration day patrols of offshore areas in varying weather conditions. Intermediate Vessels are larger than standard near shore patrol vessels and are less than 38 feet in length. They do not have berthing for crew members.

"Life in the FWC's Offshore Patrol Vessel program is not for the faint of heart. Long hours combined with unfavorable sea conditions can be trying to even the strongest and most committed officer," said Colonel Roger Young, FWC's Director of the Division of Law Enforcement. "The FWC officers in our OPV program have embraced these challenges and won. The OPV program's track record is extensive and diverse, demonstrating their broad commitment to the protection of the people and natural resources on both a state and federal level."

In addition to state and federal fisheries patrol, OPV assets are proficient in search and rescue operations, resource protection, Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) patrols, commercial fishing enforcement, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) coverage, turtle excluder device (TED) inspections, and provide support services to local, state and federal partners.

JURISDICTION

All FWC officers are federally deputized with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and because of this, the FWC has developed a strong partnership with federal agencies and the U.S. Coast Guard. A Joint Enforcement Agreement with the NMFS gives the FWC the authority to patrol federal waters in addition to state waters while enforcing both state and federal fisheries regulations.

SUCCESS STORY

Off the west coast of Florida, the OPV *Fin Cat* crew, along with FWC Aviation, conducted an operation targeting stone crabbers placing and working their gear in the Big Bend shrimp-stone crab separation zones in Citrus County. During the operation, a commercial stone crab vessel was observed working a secretive unmarked long line of stone crab traps in a closed zone. Before the *Fin Cat* crew could initiate a vessel stop, the fishermen dropped the long line and upon boarding stated they were broken down. The FWC aviation crew had already taken over 100 photos and recorded the GPS coordinates of where the vessel was working gear inside the closed zone.

The *Fin Cat* crew addressed the violations and followed the stone crab vessel back to the dock. When they arrived at the dock, the captain and crew were placed under arrest. A search incident to arrest revealed two of the crew members to be in possession of methamphetamine and drug paraphernalia. All subjects were booked into the Citrus County jail for several felony and misdemeanor violations.

The next morning, the *Fin Cat* crew returned to the exact GPS waypoint where the vessel had dropped the line. After a short search with a grappling hook, the officers located the rest of the illegal traps and placed them into evidence.

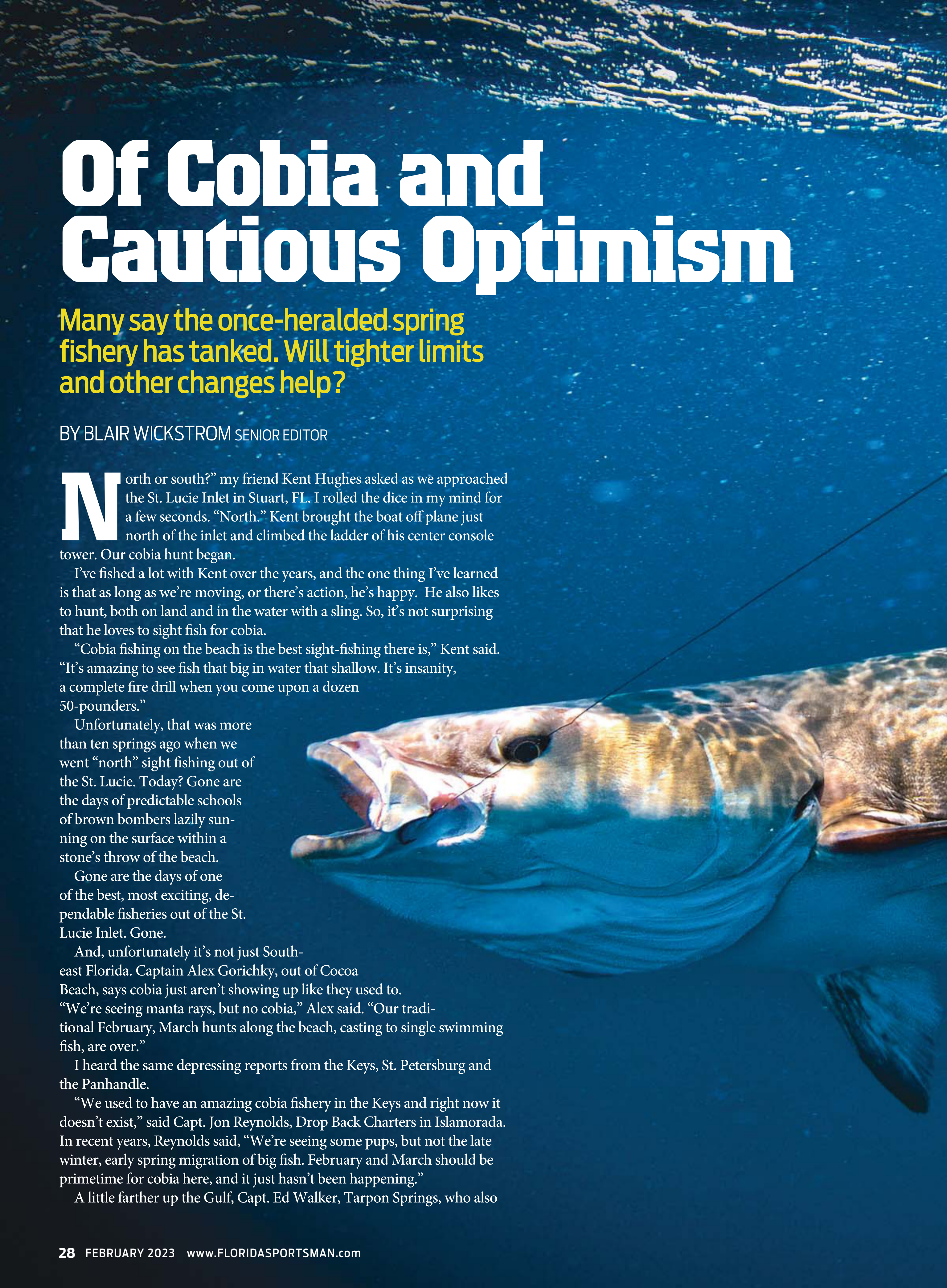
With the assistance of numerous field officers and biologists, the *Fin Cat* crew located and retrieved 981 additional stone crab traps from the closed zone. All the traps were identified by tag numbers and came back to the same individual that was arrested. The traps were seized as evidence and further FWC charges were filed. It was a great team effort and an excellent example of the value of the FWC OPV program. FS

Develop a Life Jacket Habit
Inflatable life jackets are so comfortable you can wear them all the time. Wear your life jacket ... you and your family will be glad you did.
WEAR IT
In partnership with the National Safe Boating Council
Florida
WearItFlorida.com
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Law Enforcement
MyFWC.com
FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE ★ CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Of Cobia and Cautious Optimism

Many say the once-heralded spring fishery has tanked. Will tighter limits and other changes help?

BY BLAIR WICKSTROM SENIOR EDITOR



"North or south?" my friend Kent Hughes asked as we approached the St. Lucie Inlet in Stuart, FL. I rolled the dice in my mind for a few seconds. "North." Kent brought the boat off plane just north of the inlet and climbed the ladder of his center console tower. Our cobia hunt began.

I've fished a lot with Kent over the years, and the one thing I've learned is that as long as we're moving, or there's action, he's happy. He also likes to hunt, both on land and in the water with a sling. So, it's not surprising that he loves to sight fish for cobia.

"Cobia fishing on the beach is the best sight-fishing there is," Kent said. "It's amazing to see fish that big in water that shallow. It's insanity, a complete fire drill when you come upon a dozen 50-pounders."

Unfortunately, that was more than ten springs ago when we went "north" sight fishing out of the St. Lucie. Today? Gone are the days of predictable schools of brown bombers lazily sunning on the surface within a stone's throw of the beach.

Gone are the days of one of the best, most exciting, dependable fisheries out of the St. Lucie Inlet. Gone.

And, unfortunately it's not just Southeast Florida. Captain Alex Gorichky, out of Cocoa Beach, says cobia just aren't showing up like they used to. "We're seeing manta rays, but no cobia," Alex said. "Our traditional February, March hunts along the beach, casting to single swimming fish, are over."

I heard the same depressing reports from the Keys, St. Petersburg and the Panhandle.

"We used to have an amazing cobia fishery in the Keys and right now it doesn't exist," said Capt. Jon Reynolds, Drop Back Charters in Islamorada. In recent years, Reynolds said, "We're seeing some pups, but not the late winter, early spring migration of big fish. February and March should be primetime for cobia here, and it just hasn't been happening."

A little farther up the Gulf, Capt. Ed Walker, Tarpon Springs, who also

There’s a good chance you’ll see a cobia on your line in the next few months, but will it make the new legal size, 36 inches?

Photo by Pat Ford

participates on the cobia-mackerel Advisory Panel (AP) for the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, says, “We’re still seeing 15- to 20-pound fish on the flats, but we’re not seeing the big fish.”

And regarding those historic beach runs of cobia in the Panhandle in April and May? Same sad story. Not a lot of free-swimming fish. “We’re still catching fish on the wrecks,” said Capt. Dave Yelverton, Pensacola. “But, just not the traditional second bar, 15 to 18 feet, sight fishing fishery.”

So, what gives? It’s hard to tell, but state and federal fishery managers are acting. And for the first time in years, they’re on the same page.

As of November 21, 2022, cobia limits for both state and federal waters in the Atlantic and Gulf are the same. Everyone, both commercial and recreational angler, must abide by the same 36-inch mininum, one fish per person, two fish daily vessel limits.

Hopefully, the increased minimum size limit, going from 33 to 36 inches, while cutting the vessel limit from six to two fish will make a difference to the fast-growing species.

But a history of incremental tweaks to the fishery doesn’t seem to be working. As recreational catches continue to go down, we continue to make small adjustments to daily and vessel limits. Commercial landings mirror the same trend.

In 1990, following a 32-percent drop in recreational landings from 1981 (227,967 fish to 153,660), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) instituted the two fish limit in state waters for both recreational anglers and commercial, which seemed to work. Both commercial landings and recreational catches went up each year in the early ’90s, going from 109 metric tons in 1990 for commercial landings to 165.9 metric tons in 1996. Rec-caught fish also increased back to 223,861 fish.

But, in 2000 with catch numbers down, it was clear there was still a problem. Both commercial and recreational caught fish plummeted. Commercial landings fell 42 percent from 1996 to 2000. And the recreational fishery dropped to 128,013 fish, also a 42-percent reduction.

Following the noticeable drop in 2000, Florida designated cobia as a restricted species and established a one fish bag, six fish per day vessel limit for recreational anglers and a two fish per day, six fish per day vessel limit for commercial fishermen.

Again, the incremental change seemed to be working and recreational catches increased to 167,947 fish in 2010 but then crashed in 2018, dropping to 139,527, a 17-percent decline. Commercial landings fell more drastically, from 88 metric tons in 2010 to 33 metric tons (a 62-percent drop)

The 2018 decline prompted the FWC to create the “Gulf Region” for the purpose of managing cobia. The commission also reduced the commercial bag limit from two

Colorful jigs are kept at the ready for sightings on piers, once a frequent occurrence in late February.

Photo by Joe Richard

SPRING COBIA TACTICS

SURFACE-SWIMMING COBIA look very much like sharks. Watch for their brown shapes. They’re usually pretty accepting of bucktail jigs, plastic swimbaits or any kind of natural bait. The trick is getting the presentation out in front of them.

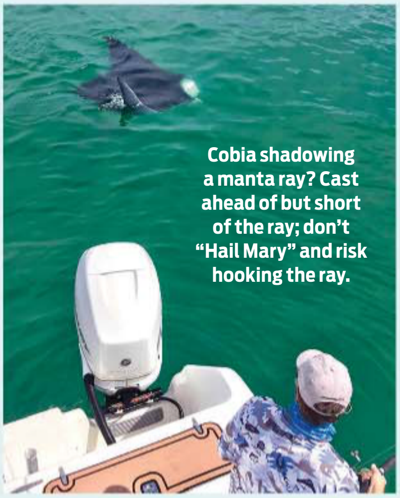
Cobia also frequently gang up around wrecks and reefs, where they like to forage around the bottom. Sending down a live bait on a dropper rig or sliding sinker rig is a good tactic.

The fish also have a habit of idling alongside channel markers, navigational buoys and crab trap buoys. Here again, a jig or live bait will get bit.

Cobia accompanying manta rays are also to be expected at times, but resist the urge to cast long and haphazardly around a manta. Maintain a respectful distance with your boat and watch for the cobia to emerge from the shadow of the ray, where a cast between you and the manta could trigger a strike. Hooking a manta is bad form.

Southern stingrays, which swim on the bottom, are also apt to hold cobia. If you’re in clear water and have access to a spotting tower (Florida Keys), watching for this alignment can be productive.

Cobia don’t have teeth, and while they aren’t particularly leader-shy, it can pay to use 40- or 50-pound fluorocarbon leader. Sturdy tackle, 30-pound-test at least, is recommended.



Cobia shadowing a manta ray? Cast ahead of but short of the ray; don’t “Hail Mary” and risk hooking the ray.

to one fish per day and reduced the recreational and commercial vessel daily limit from six to two cobia in Gulf waters.

And now, following the most recent change, effective November 21, 2022, the daily possession and size limits for both recreational and commercial anglers for both coasts in state and federal waters is one fish per person, with a two fish vessel with a minimum size limit 36 inches fork length.

DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

"Unfortunately, we just don't know a lot about this fishery, uncertainty is very large," said Ryan Rindone, lead fishery biologist for the federal Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. "Information on cobia is light."

What we do know is that recreational anglers take the lion's share of cobia. But, there's been a steady, but smaller, commercial harvest as well. Longlines started to target cobia in 1986, but more impactful to cobia has been the food shrimp trawlers in the Gulf.

Records show that at the height of the shrimping activity in the 1970s and '80s, a lot of cobia were being caught in shrimp nets. Rindone told me that from 1972 through 2017, an average of 254,000 cobia were caught annually as bycatch in shrimp nets, with over 1 million cobia caught in 1979.

Thankfully today, due to a number of circumstances, there are far fewer cobia being caught in shrimp nets. From an overall reduction in the number of boats shrimping, turtle excluder devices, market conditions and foreign imports of farm raised shrimp, it's been good news for cobia on that front.

However, there may be new stressors to the fishery. Starting with one that bites. Shark depredation. Captain Alex Gorichky told me that the only way to find cobia off Canaveral now is by chumming and fishing cobia off the sharks.

The normally cordial, symbiotic relationship between big bull sharks and the sometimes "looks like a shark" cobia ends when a cobia gets tight to an angler. "Shark depredation of cobia has got to be making an impact on the fishery," said Jeff Weakley, editor of *Florida Sportsman*. "Every day during the spring, sharks are eating cobia that are hooked up to anglers off of Stuart and Palm Beach."

This cobia wears ID tag related to ongoing study: ***myfwc.com/research/saltwater/fishtags/cobia/***

HOOK & TACKLE®

OFFSHORE LURES

PERFORMANCE HOODIE

- SUN PROTECTION
- ODOR-RESISTANT
- QUICK-DRY
- RADIAL SLEEVES
- KEEPS YOU COOL

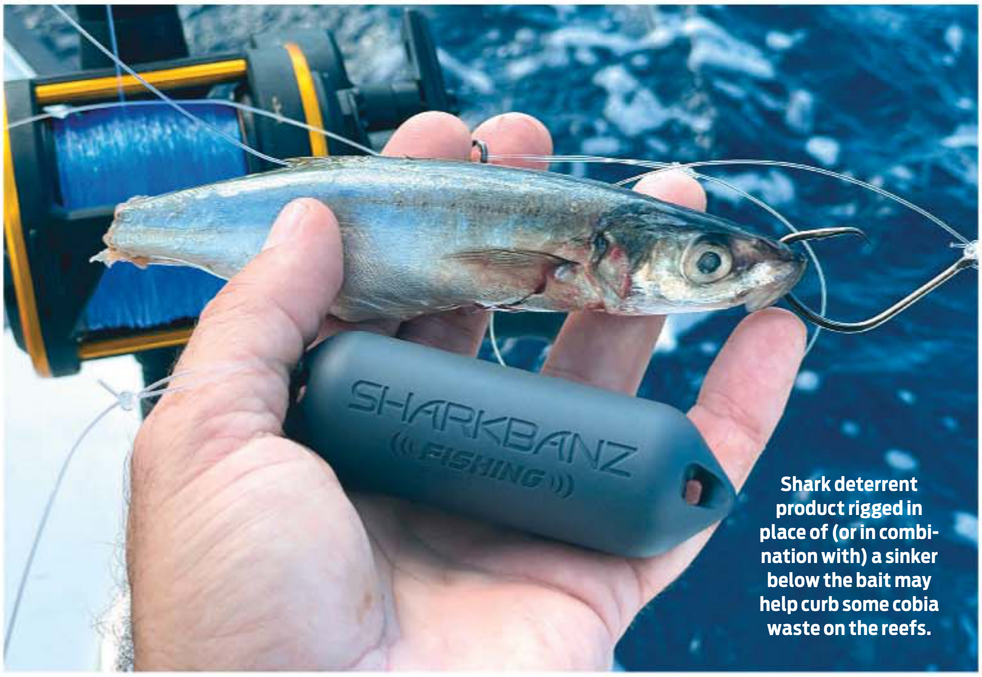
Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

FOLLOW US:

hookandtackle.com

PERFORMANCE
HOOK & TACKLE
OUTFITTERS



Shark deterrent product rigged in place of (or in combination with) a sinker below the bait may help curb some cobia waste on the reefs.

Another growing concern relates to a threat you rarely can see but sometimes can smell. *Karenia brevis*, red tide.

Cobia are fast-growing fish, but according to Rindone most likely don't head offshore until they're sexually mature around age two, somewhere between 18 and 30 inches.

If this is true, and cobia are spending the first year of their lives in the estuaries, where we continually are having harmful algae blooms, red tide events and fish kills, could this be leading to reduced cobia numbers?

Rindone says we simply don't know what impact red tide has on the fishery. He did say that cobia are pelagic, but not like kingfish or dolphin. "Cobia tend to hang around," Rindone said. Not a good thing with a surface-to-bottom red curtain of death being pushed ashore.

The Gulf Council is in the early stages of developing ecosystem plans to help fishery managers account for factors, such as red tide, outside of directed fishing.

LOOKING FORWARD

The most recent cobia stock assessment was completed in 2020, using data through 2018. The next stock assessment won't be until 2024. So, for now, at least we have the state and feds, and the Atlantic and Gulf, all operating with the same 36-inch minimum size limit as well as daily bag and vessel limits.

The reduced catch limits should help, but with the larger minimum size we're going to be releasing more fish, putting a premium on proper fish handling.

Let's do our best to make sure these undersized cobia survive. Use a net, not a gaff, when landing cobia if you're not sure it's keeper size. Also, land these fish quickly and don't use a towel, which can remove the needed slime from the skin of the cobia, when handling the fish boat side. Try to avoid—or at least not frequent—areas where shark depredation is predictable. One tip: If you do hook a cobia in an area where sharks are around, ease off on the drag. Many times the hooked cobia will cease struggling and swim away from the area. Follow with your boat. Carrying a jig or bottom-fishing rig, the cobia's natural instinct will be to swim to the surface. Watch for that reaction—then be ready to guide the fish to the net or gaff.

One promising development: Shark deterrents. The Sharkbanz Zeppelin ($75) is a powerful magnet which may be integrated into a fishing rig. It weighs 6 ½ ounces and easily doubles as a sinker, with rings top and bottom for rigging. If a shark closing in on a fish on your line swims within 2 or 3 feet of the Zeppelin, its electrosensory system will be temporarily disrupted by the magnetic field. It's not a fail-safe, but video footage by Sharkbanz developers and independent researchers has clearly shown sharks swimming away from cobia and other species hooked on rigs incorporating the Zeppelin (formal success rates are still under investigation).

In the end, as Rindone points out, "Cobia are an extremely fast-growing fish. By age two 50 percent are thought to be sexually mature."

So the potential for recovery is there.

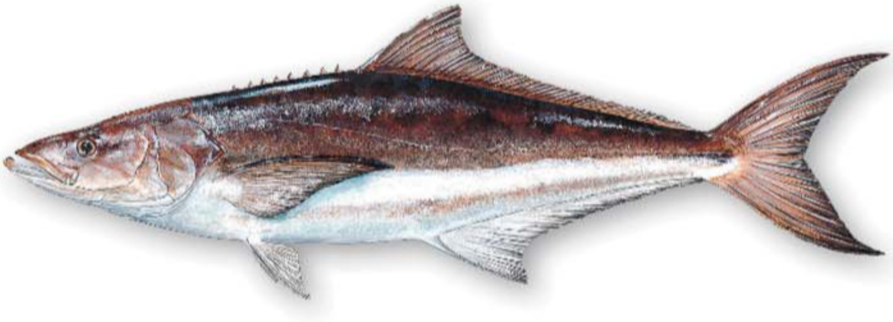
The takeaway? If we cut back on the number of cobia kept, improve release mortality numbers, decrease depredation and get a handle on the supercharged red tide events, we can all plan for the day where we're stalking the beaches again for the mighty brown bomber. FS

CURRENT COBIA REGULATIONS:

Gulf and Atlantic State and Federal Waters

MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT: 36 inches fork length

DAILY BAG LIMIT: 1 per day or 2 per vessel, whichever is less



Fish It All.

The new Pathfinder 2400 Open is specialized for versatility, no matter the season, the place or the prey. Open up your fishing game and be the complete angler that you want to be.

PATHFINDER
ANGLER DRIVEN

YAMAHA

WWW.PATHFINDERBOATS.COM

GARMIN

PARADISE NOT LOST

AILING EVERGLADES SHOWS GLIMMERS OF HOPE THAT FLORIDA BAY CAN BE SAVED.

BY STEVE DOUGHERTY MANAGING EDITOR

It was pitch black as Capt. Steven Tejera and I cruised along Ingraham Highway with his 17-foot Maverick HPX-V in tow. I beat the alarm clock that morning, as is always the case before a fishing trip, and had already been awake for hours reminiscing on all the good times we had in Everglades National Park: tailing reds east of Flamingo, times we'd run out to Sandy Key looking for tarpon, snook in Hell's Bay, free-floating tripletail in Florida Bay and exploring the remote shorelines beyond Shark River.

I remember fishing Snake Bight before the pole/troll zone was implemented. The water was crystal clear and waving blades of grass sheltered all kinds of marine life. Since those glory days not too far gone, manmade interruptions to the Everglades watershed have dramatically impacted the health of the estuaries and fisheries that require clean water to survive.

Captain Steven Tejera has been fishing Everglades National

70
Maverick
Maverick
Maverick

From the platform atop his Maverick HPX-V, Capt. Steven Tejera scans the shallows for signs of life. Redfish are a major target of anglers fishing Flamingo.

FLORIDA BAY

There's no shortage of snook in the Everglades. We spotted this one swimming tight to the edge of the mangroves in Garfield Bight.

Park and Florida Bay for many years, spending most of his childhood exploring the backcountry in a trusty johnboat. Growing up in Homestead, guiding professionally for nearly 15 years and winning some of the most prestigious inshore tournaments along the way, Steven has matured into one of the most respected and well-rounded guides in the area.

Our recent trip to Flamingo began like any other day in the Everglades: menacing insects amid the largest contiguous stand of protected mangrove forest in the northern hemisphere. Within seconds of idling out the marina basin we could hear fish slurping baits deep beneath the nearby mangroves. After barely skimming the surface of potential snook habitat while waiting for the sun to rise higher in the sky, we shifted focus from the shorelines to the flats.

As Steven climbed up the poling platform, fish were blowing out all around us. Sight fishing with a Z-Man Diezel MinnowZ, it wasn't long until I released an upper-slot redfish, and then a snook. For the next hour we saw nonstop action and Steven claimed this was the best fishing in the park that he'd seen in the last few years. We caught more than 20 fish with two soft plastics before the waning tide forced us to retreat to deeper water. The Everglades was enlivened, and it was a sight to see.

While we can be thankful that Flamingo is showing signs of rejuvenation, we cannot stand idle amid decades of water and resource mismanagement. Over the course of the last century, with the collaborative effects of agricultural and urban development to appease the Sunshine State's population boom, the size of the Everglades has been slashed significantly. In its former state, fresh water meandered down the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee, and south through sawgrass marsh, cypress swamp, wet prairie and mangrove habitat before reaching Florida Bay's gin-clear grassflats. Florida's landscape has changed dramatically over the years and the effects of depriving the Everglades of fresh water have triggered a cascade of ecological impacts.

After the recent Bonefish & Tarpon Trust International Science Symposium in Palm Beach Gardens, I had the chance to catch up with Dr. Ross Boucek to talk about the health of Florida Bay. Ross is the Keys Initiative Manager for BTT and has a wealth of knowledge regarding the Everglades.

"We've basically starved the ecosystem of fresh water. What that has done is made this progressive change in the seagrass communities," says Boucek. "It really favored too much growth of the turtlegrass species. There's a lot of great things turtlegrass does for carbon sequestration, and it makes fishing awesome, but the negative is that it makes the system very vulnerable to drought."

A fly and light tackle specialist, Tejera rigs paddletails for snook and redfish with Z-Man SnakelockZ jigheads. The snag-free baits can be crawled through thick grass with ease.

An extensive drought aggravated by El Niño further diminished the amount of fresh water entering Florida Bay in 2015. By mid-July, the NOAA Garfield Bight (GBTF1) monitoring station reported average salinities readings of 72 g/kg, the highest value ever recorded in Florida Bay. Seemingly overnight, 40,000 acres of grass died and floated to the surface.

"The seagrass community got to this hyper-dense state. And then we had a drought come in which increased the salinities in the system to levels that you would see in the Great Salt Lake, which killed the central west portion of Florida Bay. That's where the heart of the fishery is—Snake Bight, Garfield, Rankin and Whipray Basin," says Boucek.

Mangrove habitats have also suffered in recent years, albeit from natural events. Like vast grassflats, mangrove ecosystems provide refuge for juvenile fish and invertebrates before heading to other ecosystems, while some live within the tangled expanse for entire lifecycles. In 2017, Hurricane Irma delivered large-scale defoliation, tree snapping and uprooting to mangrove forests. Much of the remaining seagrass present before the storm was swept away, leaving nothing but a wasteland of mud bottom.

Though it can be hard to remain positive in the face of such doom and gloom, Tejera never gave up on the Everglades and the fisheries he is so passionate about. "There were periods where it was definitely hard to find the fish," he says. "For a year or two, most days we only caught 5 or so fish, but there were times during the height of the seagrass die-off that we still caught 40 to 50 fish in a day."

The relationship between habitat loss and fish is one where everything is fine until it isn't. "You can take a bunch of habitat away from the fish and the population will still kind of exist," says Boucek. "They'll move, they'll eat different things, and they will be more crowded in specific areas that are still healthy. Catch rates will still be pretty high until you eventually come past some threshold and the population crashes really quickly, and then you have to work really hard to get it back."

Thankfully, the last four months of 2020 brought nearly two feet of rain to the Everglades, which was a huge benefit to the exhausted environment. Evidently, changes to the seagrass communities occurred shortly after. Captains

Fishing in the Everglades is not a walk in the park. You'll have plenty of shots, but accurate casts are a necessity.

Import HUNDREDS of Waypoints in SECONDS!

10% Coupon getfish

Americagofishing Fishing & Dive Sites Memory Card

Used by Professionals

Reefs, Shipwrecks and More!

Easy • Accurate • Affordable

Americagofishing.com/gps

Tropical Equipment Sales & Leasing
Glen St. Mary, Florida

Why Buy Ice? Make your own and save Time & Money!

MANITOWOC
A Welbilt Brand

ICE MAKERS & RESTAURANT EQUIPMENT
SALES, SERVICE & LEASING

Toll Free (877) 423-6253 • Phone (904) 259-5327
tropicalequip@nefcom.net

ANYTIME, ANYWHERE
DIGITAL ACCESS INCLUDED WITH YOUR PAID SUBSCRIPTION!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

The health of Florida Bay and its prized fisheries boils down to water quality, or the lack thereof.

reported clear water in certain areas with some signs of enlivened grass meadows. Known as pioneer species, shoal grass, manatee grass and eelgrass are rapidly growing early colonizers. They are basically weeds, but green and alive and little critters love it.

"I've seen the fish behave differently in the new growth," says Tejera. "The taller grass kind of creates a little edge. Sometimes I notice the reds and snook will sit around those other types of grass, because they feel like they can blend better versus being on top of the turtlegrass."

Beginning in late 1987 and lasting through 1989, Florida Bay experienced a similar problem, yet at the time it was an unprecedented event. "We are seeing the same exact thing happening where everything died initially," says Boucek. "The species that are really quick to take advantage of open areas filled in, and that began to stabilize settlements, kind of pulling some of the nutrients out of the water column released from the die-off. Once they get everything sort of stabilized, then the turtlegrass, which is a better competitor, moves in and takes over. In a natural system where you have the right amount of fresh water it would keep the turtlegrass in check a little bit. It would not cause the overpopulated, super thick, abundant seagrass that we have when we chronically starve it from fresh water."

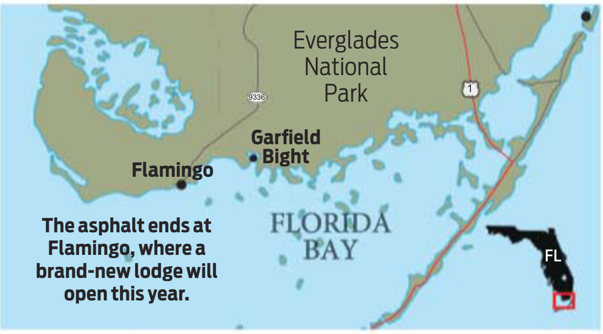
Despite recent ailments, Everglades National Park is still a place like no other. The 1.5 million mostly inaccessible acres of habitat located at the southernmost tip of the Florida peninsula serve as a sanctuary for an array of subtropical and temperate wildlife species found nowhere else in the world. Fishing in the park is truly a unique experience.

"In terms of the holistic view of the habitat, it's pretty okay apart from this chronic problem we have. But just because the water is clear and the grass looks healthy doesn't mean that the system isn't one drought away, one hurricane away, one cold front away from complete collapse," says Boucek.

For now, we are lucky to catch a glimpse of the Everglades in a fraction of its former glory. "A big focus of the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust is to get everyone to start caring about protecting the habitats, from the policy management side. Since it was developed, fisheries management just assumed that habitat would always be constant and the only thing that would adjust the population would be fishing mortalities; i.e. how many fish do we take out of the system," says Boucek.

Water management manipulations are certainly the largest threat to the park's vitality and the larger Everglades watershed. Widespread seagrass die-offs never happened in the past, not until the last 30 years, and this is a whole new problem created by humans. What started as four main canals in the mid-1900s running from Lake Okeechobee to the southeast has developed into a complex system of pump stations, gates, locks, culverts, canals and dikes deemed necessary to prevent inland flooding and secure irrigation supplies for farming, predominantly sugarcane.

It's glaringly apparent how badly we've messed up the natural flow of water and at this point the only solution to healthy habitat and clean water is a human solution backed by science and policy changes. "It's a two-part fix: bring more fresh water to Florida Bay, and that water needs to be super clean. If neither one is not viable, then it's never going to work," says Boucek. FS



The asphalt ends at Flamingo, where a brand-new lodge will open this year.

TRAVEL GUIDE

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK has three access points. The boat ramp at Flamingo is a 38-mile drive from the Homestead entrance. Entry fee is $30 for a single vehicle, valid for seven days at all three park entrances. Completion of a free online education course is required to operate a boat within ENP waters. If you're in it for more than a day trip, backcountry camping permits are available at the Flamingo and Gulf Coast visitor's centers ($21 fee, plus $2 per day). Visit nps.gov to learn about no motor zones, pole/troll zones and areas that are closed to fishing.

4 FOOT SWELLS
I GET SICK
15 KNOT WINDS
TOO ROUGH OUT T
UNCOMFORTABLE
ROCKING
NEVER GONNA M
WAVES ARE TOO BIG
BIGGER THA

SEAKEEPER

www.seakeeper.com

NO MORE EXCUSES

Bad to the Bone

*Full tang stainless steel blade with natural bone handle —now **ONLY $79!***

The very best hunting knives possess a perfect balance of form and function. They're carefully constructed from fine materials, but also have that little something extra to connect the owner with nature.

If you're on the hunt for a knife that combines impeccable craftsmanship with a sense of wonder, the **$79 *Huntsman Blade*** is the trophy you're looking for.

The blade is full tang, meaning it doesn't stop at the handle but extends to the length of the grip for the ultimate in strength. The blade is made from 420 surgical steel, famed for its sharpness and its resistance to corrosion.

The handle is made from genuine natural bone, and features decorative wood spacers and a hand-carved motif of two overlapping feathers— a reminder for you to respect and connect with the natural world.

This fusion of substance and style can garner a high price tag out in the marketplace. In fact, we found full tang, stainless steel blades with bone handles in excess of $2,000. Well, that won't cut it around here. We have mastered the hunt for the best deal, and in turn pass the spoils on to our customers.

But we don't stop there. While supplies last, we'll include a pair of $99 8x21 power compact binoculars *and* a genuine leather sheath FREE when you purchase the ***Huntsman Blade***.

Your satisfaction is 100% guaranteed. Feel the knife in your hands, wear it on your hip, inspect the impeccable craftsmanship. If you don't feel like we cut you a fair deal, send it back within 30 days for a complete refund of the item price.

Limited Reserves. A deal like this won't last long. We have only 1120 ***Huntsman Blades*** for this ad only. Don't let this beauty slip through your fingers. Call today!

BONUS! Call today and you'll also receive this genuine leather sheath!

EXCLUSIVE
FREE
Stauer® 8x21
Compact
Binoculars
-a $99 value-
with purchase of
Huntsman Blade

What Stauer Clients Are Saying About Our Knives

★★★★★

"This knife is beautiful!"

— J., La Crescent, MN

★★★★★

"The feel of this knife is unbelievable...this is an incredibly fine instrument."

— H., Arvada, CO

Huntsman Blade ~~$249~~*

Offer Code Price Only $79 + S&P Save $170

1-800-333-2045

Your Insider Offer Code: HUK905-01

You must use the insider offer code to get our special price.

ACCREDITED BUSINESS **Rating** of **A+**

Stauer®
14101 Southcross Drive W., Ste 155, Dept. HUK905-01
Burnsville, Minnesota 55337 www.stauer.com

**Discount is only for customers who use the offer code versus the listed original Stauer.com price.*

California residents please call 1-800-333-2045 regarding Proposition 65 regulations before purchasing this product.

- **12" overall length; 6 ½" stainless steel full tang blade • Genuine bone handle with brass hand guard & bolsters • Includes genuine leather sheath**

Stauer... *Afford the Extraordinary.*®

BOATHOUSE

Discount Marine Supplies

Marine Supplies

Jacksonville
Melbourne
Certified Service Department

OEM Marine Parts

Authorized OEM Marine Engine & Parts Dealer

Trailer Parts

Trailer Sales

YAMAHA
MERCURY MerCruiser
HONDA MARINE
EVINRUDE Johnson GENUINE PARTS BRP
SUZUKI MARINE
TOHATSU Outboards
VOLVO PENTA
AUTHORIZED DEALER CONTINENTAL Trailers SALES ★ PARTS ★ SERVICE

Melbourne
557 N. Harbor City Blvd
Melbourne, FL 32935
(321) 254-2535

Jacksonville
5615 Blanding Blvd
Jacksonville, FL 32244
(904) 778-7775

BoathouseDiscountMarine.com

BIG UGLY

It's the season to watch for open-water schools of black drum. But if you really want one, jig deep around inshore structure.

By Capt. Juan C. Levesque, Ph.D

The writer with a sizable black drum taken on Capt. Eli Rico's Wooldridge aluminum boat, customized for fishing Tampa Bay bridges and other local fisheries.

The enormous school of black drum moved slowly in a clockwise pattern a few hundred yards off Cocoa Beach. Positioning the vessel to intercept the school, Capt. Jamie Glasner instructed his angler to cast the heavy yellow bullet head bucktail jig in front of the approaching school.

"It was one of the most epic fishing days I have ever witnessed on the water," Glasner remembered. "We were sight-fishing for drum in the 40- to 60-pound range along the beach. The beach migration can occur any time between January and April. Unfortunately, I only witness this behavior one or two days a year." Glasner said 2017 was a memorable year, when the schools posted up for several weeks.

I had watched some of this footage and called Glasner about setting up a trip. He said it's tough to predict, not something easy to pin down on a particular day. "All I can say is, be ready at a moment's notice in case they show up this spring," he advised.

Another guide in Glasner's part of the state, Capt. Kade Knuutila told me certain areas are better than others in the Titusville region depending on the water temperature. In winter (January and February), he finds black drum on the flats, but in late-winter and early spring they prefer the Haulover Canal.

> "The beach migration can occur **anytime between January and April**. Be ready at a moment's notice in case they show."

Black drum, *Pogonia cromis*, are statewide in distribution. On my home waters of Tampa Bay, drum are known to spawn primarily in March and April, but the month likely varies somewhat throughout Florida. Based on findings from Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission researchers Kevin Peters and Bob McMichael, Jr., peak spawning occurs along the nearshore Gulf waters and lower Tampa Bay, and it's usually associated with moon phase (full and new moon), water temperature, and tide.

Black drum are the taxonomic cousin of red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), which are among the most popular inshore target species in Florida. Black drum don't hold the same appeal as reds in Florida, but they are a favorite of inshore anglers from Texas to Virginia. Black drum can live longer, grow heavier, and attain larger sizes. Mike Murphey and Bob Muller, FWC researchers, reported maximum age is 43 years in the Gulf and 58 years in the Atlantic, which corresponds to around 67 inches and 115 pounds.

"You can target black drum at any of the large bridges that cross Tampa Bay," says Brent Schirmer, a local Tampa Bay expert who produces "See Ya Dude" instructional fishing content on YouTube. "What's nice about targeting black drum is you don't need a boat. Although I have a boat, I like to use my kayak to fish the bridge pilings close to shore."

I asked Brent about his rigging.

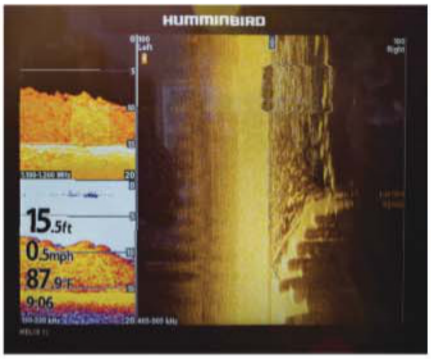
"My go-to setup is a 7-foot medium heavy action rod with a conventional reel spooled with 40-pound braid," he answered. "The 40-pound fluorocarbon leader is around 6 feet long and the circle hook is 5/0 to 7/0 depending on the bait size. I use a ½-ounce egg weight in front of the hook, a typical bottom knocker rig setup. My favorite bait is blue crab that I cut in half or quarters… you can even just use the claws."

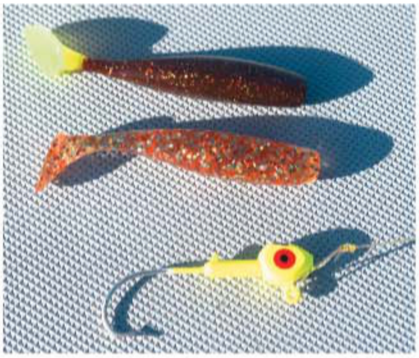
"Try to use live instead of frozen blue crabs because they will fall apart fairly quickly," Brent advised. "Fish a moving tide, like the outgoing and don't worry about the time of day… they seem to feed all day. If you don't get a strike in 15 or 20 minutes, move on to the next set of pilings."

Most everyone I spoke with uses a similar heavy-duty setup for battling these brutes under bridges. Shrimp and fiddler crabs are often used. Captain Glasner, on the Space Coast, says black drum love blue crabs, but will also take clams and sandfleas. When black drum are cruising the mud flats and oyster bars, they will strike artificial lures, like the scented Berkley Gulp! on a ⅛-ounce jighead or a gold spoon.

Determined to hook one of the bridge beasts, I continued to call around to find someone that specializes in catching this species. Captain Brock Horner, a Charlotte Harbor tarpon expert, told me he was seeing and incidentally catching many black drum during last year's tarpon season, but he never targets them. "The black drum are schooling with the tarpon," Horner said when we spoke early last summer. "It has been crazy; we are unintentionally hooking large drum on D.O.A Bait Busters."

Captain Eli Rico hooks up by the Howard Frankland Bridge on Tampa Bay. Side Imaging sonar, below, reveals structure. Shown at right are Rico's preferred shad tail jigs.





A few inshore guides told me they sometimes catch drum when targeting snook or reds, but they never target them. It seems most Florida guides don't mess with black drum… that is until I found Capt. Eli Rico who runs HotShot Guide Service (www.tampabayfishingguide.net) out of Tampa.

"I have been running black drum trips for almost a decade. If black drum are around, I can definitely put you on fish. I have a tactic that always generates strikes," stated Eli.

Later that day I got an unexpected text from Capt. Eli. "I have a cancellation for tomorrow so if you're available we can scout for black drum. I can't promise you anything because haven't seen them in a few days, but we can try if you're interested."

I instantly responded and made a plan to meet him around 0800 hours. Stepping onto his vessel, I immediately noticed it was not your typical Florida flats boat. In fact, it was a 27-foot custom aluminum hull Wooldridge Super Sport Drifter boat out of Washington State. The boat was powered by a 150 Evinrude with a tiller steering handle. The vessel was also equipped with a small kicker motor instead of a trolling motor, which was obviously unique; the amount of deck space was impressive. As we made our way to Gandy Bridge, the southernmost bridge in Tampa Bay, I picked Eli's brain.

He told me drum generally migrate into Tampa Bay in May and migrate out in July with peak fishing in June. He said, "The schools move around quite a bit so it's not an automatic home run."

Eli said the largest school he had targeted in years was last week, but he hadn't seen them in days, which he suspected was related to the bottlenose dolphins moving into the area and feeding on the fish. Making our way to the bridge, I studied the sonar screen of Eli's Humminbird, pinging high-frequency beams out to 150 feet. The detail was crisp enough to distinguish species.

Cut blue crab fished deep results in some impressive drum catches. YouTuber Brent "See Ya Dude" Schirmer shows off a beast, below.

"If the school is around, we will spot them; they can't hide," said Eli. "The black drum schools patrol the pilings so the sonar image will be apparent. My fishfinder cuts down on search time and gives my clients more time hooking fish."

After searching for a few minutes, covering a lot of area, we only spotted jacks and mackerel on the plotter. "Let's run to the next bridge and see if the drum are there," said Eli.

Approaching the Howard Frankland, he indicated the tide was starting to come in so they should be on the down current side of the bridge piling. "Black drum are always on the down current of structure or along structure waiting to ambush bottom swimming prey like small crabs."

Navigating our way along the piling, the fishfinder revealed a large school on the backside, just like Eli predicted.

I was surprised Eli doesn't use natural bait, often favored for drum fishing. He explained his tactics.

"I use a 3- to 4-inch inch D.O.A. C.A.L. shad tail in a dark color, like rootbeer or gold glitter, with either a ¼- or ⅜-ounce jig head. The black drum hit darker colors rather than lighter bright colors that don't necessarily look like a crab. The technique is to cast up current of the school and begin making small quick upward jerks with your wrist. The drum will typically make one or two strikes as the jig falls after an upward jerk. Just watch me to get hang of the technique."

The guide made a perfect cast up current a few feet off the pilings, and it didn't take long for a drum to strike. Because Eli uses a light setup (4000 series reel and 7 ½-foot light/medium rod), fighting these stocky fish requires a fast and deliberate technique of applying side to side rod pressure combined with short fast pumps to gain line on the reel or the fish will quickly break you off in the structure. His Okuma reels are spooled with 30-pound Sufix 832 green-colored braid and he prefers to use a green-tinted monofilament leader to match the water color rather than a clear fluorocarbon leader. Albright and loop knots are used to tie the leader to the braid and jig, respectively.

After catching and releasing the 25-pound drum, it was my turn on the school. Just like Eli, I worked the jig along the bottom, but made some rookie mistakes missing a few hits. Determined to master the technique, I continued casting into the sweet spot until I finally timed the strike perfectly. Fish on!

The drum immediately attempted to escape into the structure, but I was able to turn its head and gain some line. After some back and forth, we landed the fish, snapped a few pictures, and released it. As always, hooking fish is an addictive rush that makes you want more so we continued fishing for the next few hours… landing and losing some nice fish.

Much to my surprise, I learned black drum don't stay in the same spot. Once you hook or lose a few fish in a particular spot, they will move to the other side of the structure or another area along the structure. Interestingly, it seemed they preferred the shadow line caused by the sun shining on the bridge structure.

Again using the Humminbird fishfinder as our guide, I waited for Eli to navigate the vessel up current of the school and give the go ahead sign. I never made a blind cast, which is much different than I am used to on my own personal vessel. Without the technology, it would have taken a lot of work to locate drum… that is assuming they were at that particular bridge.

Next time you want to pursue a new species, consider targeting black drum at your local pier or bridge for a day of rod-bending fun. If you don't have a fancy bottom machine, simply make various blind casts along the structure or soak a bottom rig until you find the fish.

They're down there! FS

CAYMAS BOATS

THE NEW STANDARD IN QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE

888-4-CAYMAS | CaymasBoats.com

CAYMAS BOATS

THE ART OF Surf Casting

TIPS ON ELEVATING YOUR GAME—AND CATCHING MORE FISH IN THE PROCESS.

BY SID DOBRIN

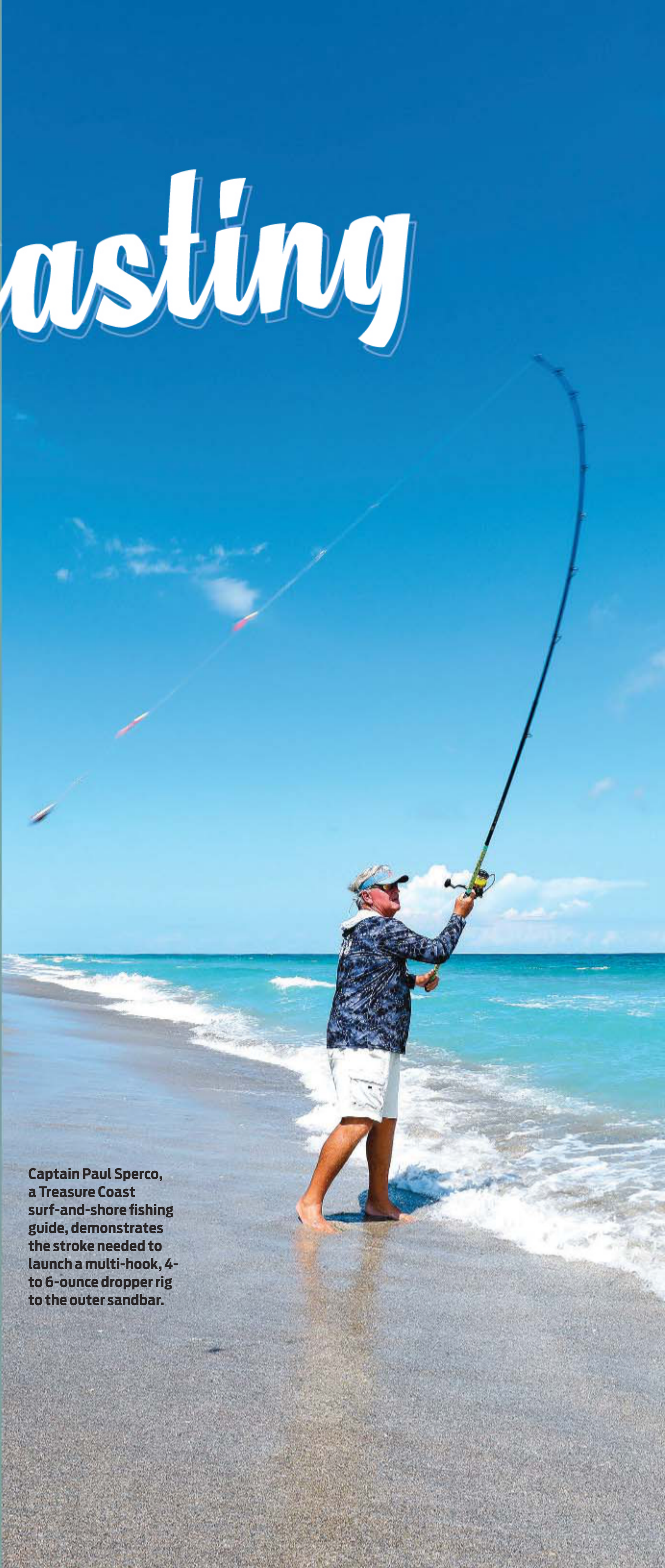
Photos by STEVE DOUGHERTY

Artistry in surf casting? It's there, if you look for it. As is the possibility of mastery, even in the spirit of fly fishing heralds like Joan Salvato Wulff or Norman "A River Runs Through It" Maclean. Here's the thing: Most Floridians don't grow up fly casting to brown trout on some mystic river fork in Montana. We grow up on beaches watching surf casters stumble about in the surf using stiff, cumbersome 15-foot rods to pitch 4-ounce Sputniks affixed to bottom rigs dripping with cut bait over 3-foot shorebreak.

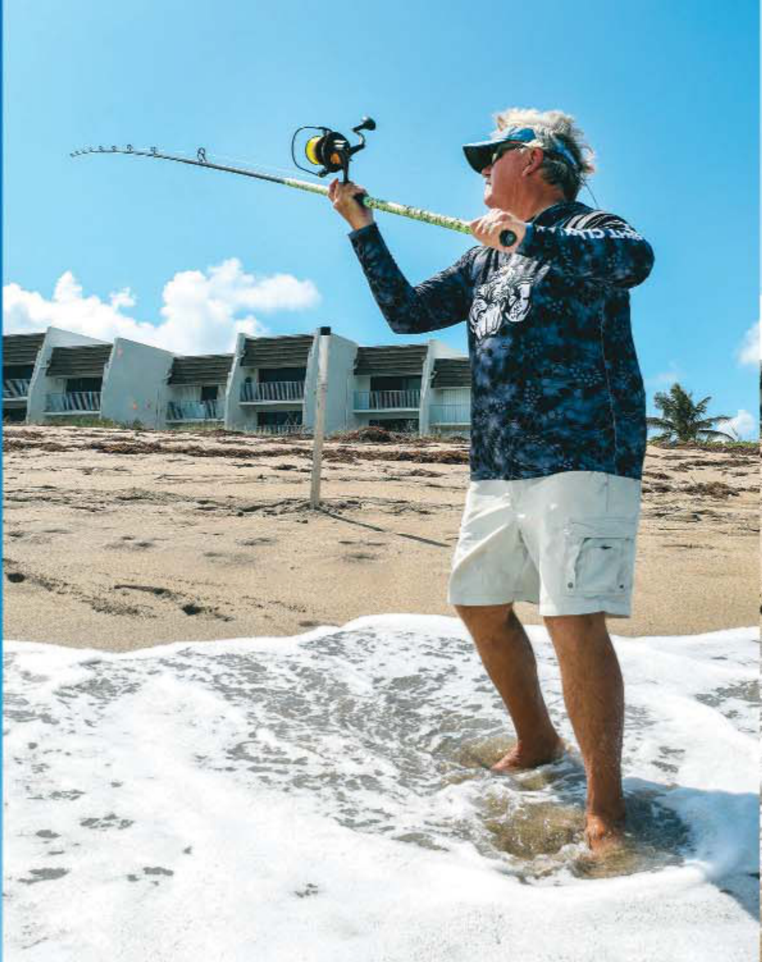
And yet I've always wondered why we don't talk about the skills, the techniques, and the artistry of surf casting in the ways in which we elevate fly casting. To me, there is no more beautiful, fluid motion than a well-wrought cast from beach to surf. Surf casting, that is to say, is a technical and beautiful part of fishing that deserves to be talked about in the same celebratory ways in which we revere fly casting (and, yes, if you are fly casting from the beach, you get double beauty points).

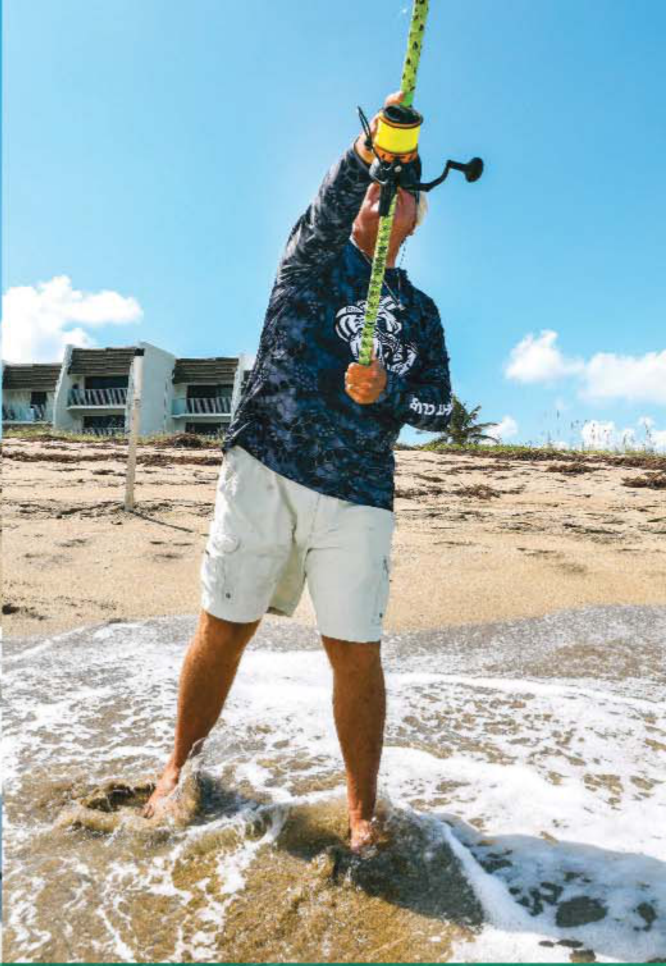
LEARNING TO CAST

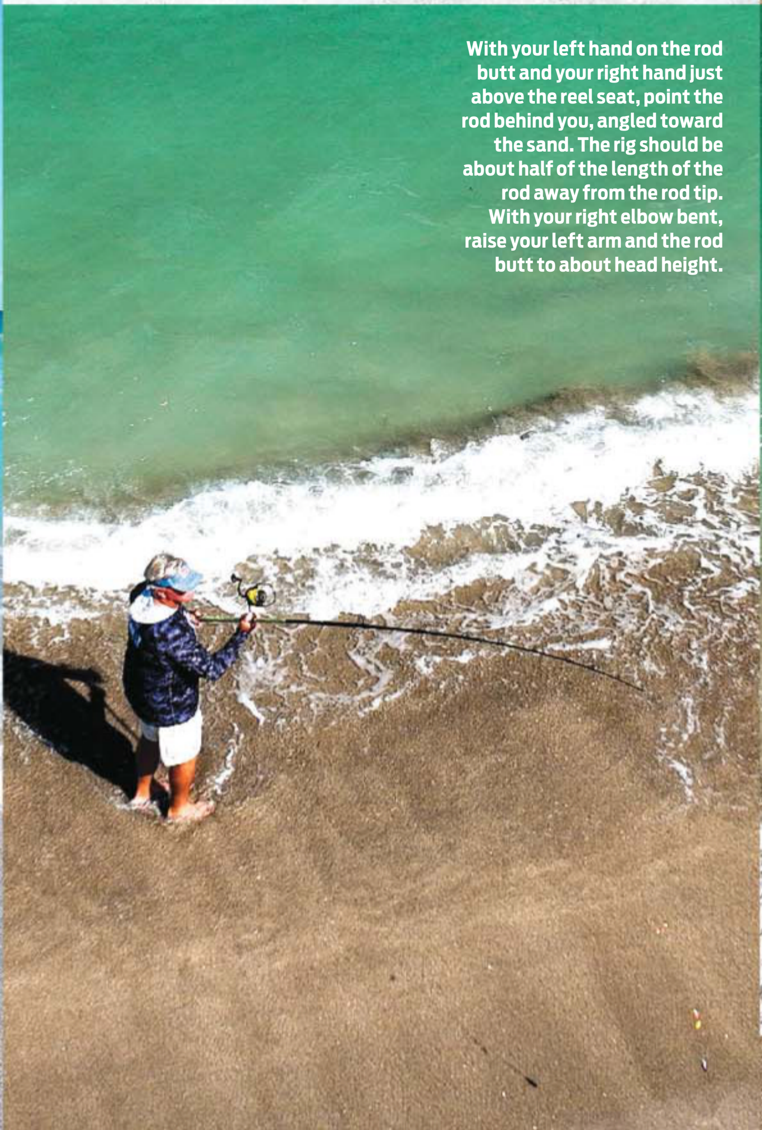
The problem is that most surf casters learn to cast with minimal if any instruction, and if you've spent any time on a Florida beach watching surf casters, you know their techniques can be as inconsistent and uncoordinated as a drunk giraffe trying to dance the "Danse des petits cygnes" from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. There's no grace, no beauty in that. Yet, when a surf caster understands the equipment, the technique, and the art, then watching that casting can be as beautiful as watching a Key West sunset. More important, though, is



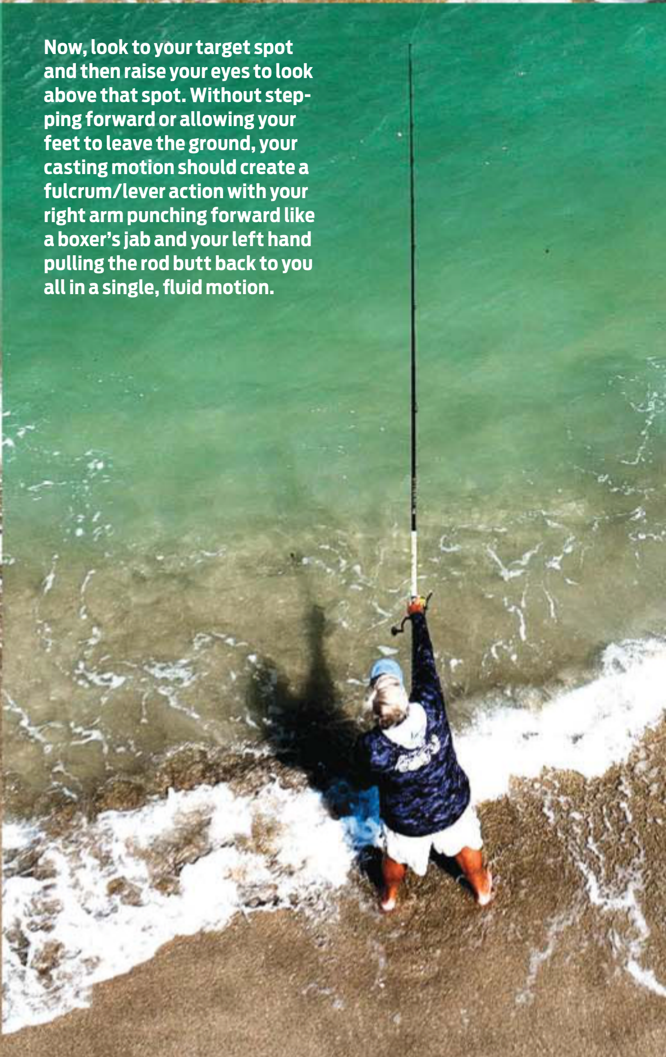
Captain Paul Sperco, a Treasure Coast surf-and-shore fishing guide, demonstrates the stroke needed to launch a multi-hook, 4- to 6-ounce dropper rig to the outer sandbar.







With your left hand on the rod butt and your right hand just above the reel seat, point the rod behind you, angled toward the sand. The rig should be about half of the length of the rod away from the rod tip. With your right elbow bent, raise your left arm and the rod butt to about head height.



Now, look to your target spot and then raise your eyes to look above that spot. Without stepping forward or allowing your feet to leave the ground, your casting motion should create a fulcrum/lever action with your right arm punching forward like a boxer's jab and your left hand pulling the rod butt back to you all in a single, fluid motion.

the likelihood that proficient casters will also increase their angling success because they understand how to best place their baits where they need to.

Teaching someone to cast by way of writing is a tough task; good casting is best learned through practice. According to Caleb Couture of Strike Zone, who runs Couture Fishing Company, a unique charter service guiding surf casters along Florida's east coast, "The hardest thing to do is to describe how to cast to someone." Couture says that you can tell someone how to stand and how to hold the rod. You can describe how a baseball batter holds his forward-facing elbow up and tell an angler to do the opposite. But you really need to put a rod in the angler's hand and show them how to do it. Couture guides seasoned anglers and those new to the activity; teaching them how to cast is part of his specialty.

Long-cast reels and custom rods, bottom, are among gear options, but ultimately it's your skill and smooth casting that keeps the bait (sandflea, above) on the hook and delivers it to the fish.

Though only gaining popularity after World War II, surf casting increased significantly in popularity during the COVID years, since it was an affordable outdoor activity in which families could participate. Likewise, rising fuel costs over the last few years have made walking the beach much more affordable than taking the boat out. Rod manufacturing companies have taken note of the increased popularity of surf casting and the growing demands of anglers for equipment that meets their local fishing needs.

Couture points out that one of the big changes to surf casting since he started as a kid is the kind of equipment available to surf casters. He points to the evolution of braided lines with thinner diameters as contributing to surf casters' ability to cast farther. "Unlike mono," he says, "braid doesn't stretch, so you get a more accurate sense of what's happening at the end of the line as it is moving around in the surf." He also explains that "When we were kids, we fished with big stout rods, 12, 13, or even 15 feet long with very heavy action." Now, fast action surf rods, lighter rods with thinner diameters are becoming more popular and more available. Rod manufacturers like Daiwa, Okuma, Shimano, St. Croix and Penn, among others, are rethinking their approaches to surf rods, including rods designed for specific surf casting conditions.

Ultimately, there are two key objectives in surf casting: distance and accuracy. How far one needs to cast is always dependent upon the place where one is casting. Is there a sandbar you are trying to cast beyond? Do you need to cast beyond heavy surf? Is there a trough where the fish are moving through? All of these kinds of localized conditions inform your decision as to how far you need to cast. However, in most cases, surf casters want to cast as far as they can, and the distance they achieve in casting is accomplished primarily through their equipment and their form.

Accuracy follows distance in that once you can control the distance of your casting and have a better sense of your casting ranges, you can hone those skills to more precisely place casts where you want them.

TIPS FOR SURF CASTING

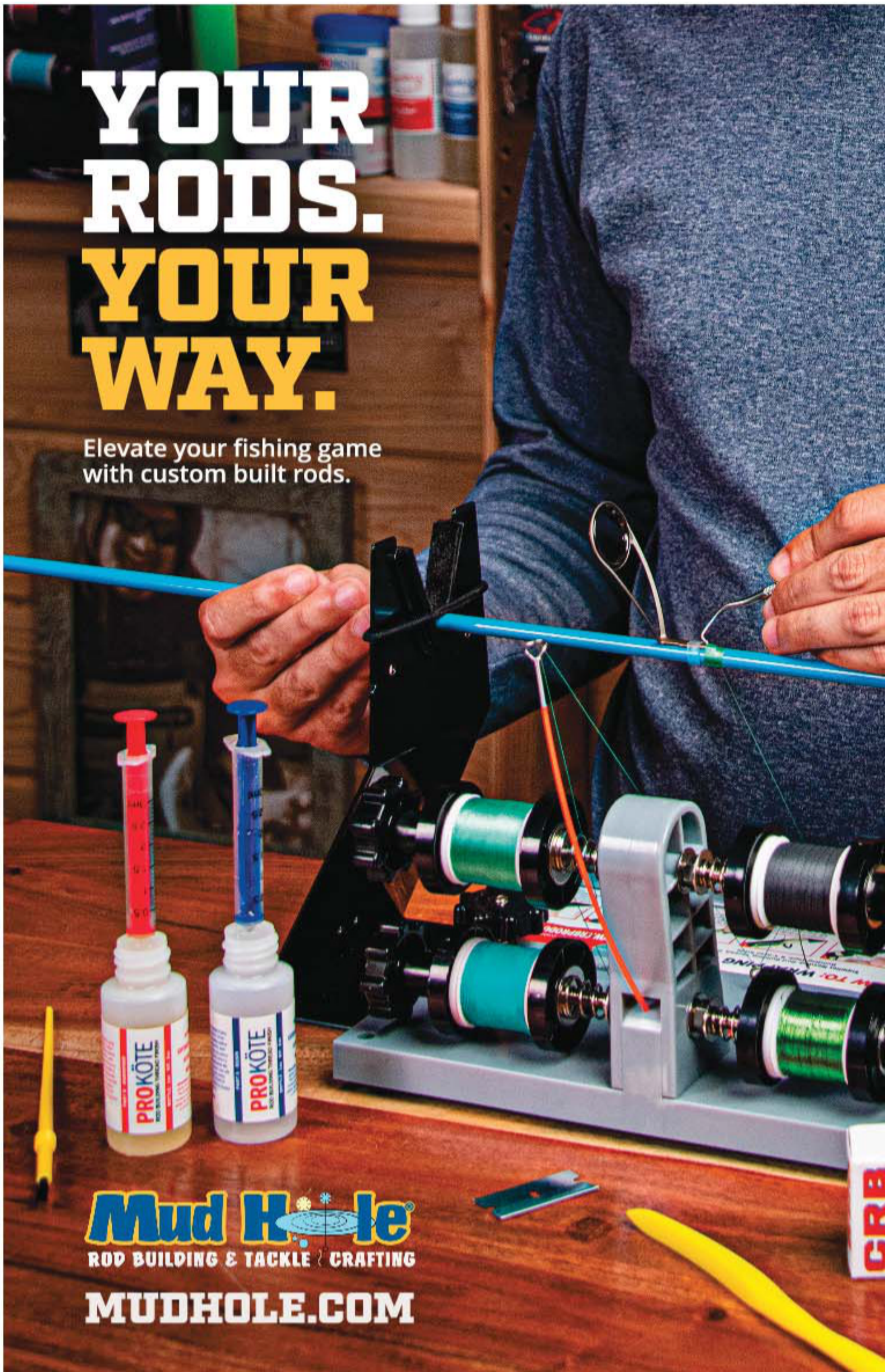
Like I said, teaching someone how to cast through writing may not be the best approach. Nonetheless, there are some fundamental guidelines for improving your surf casting in terms of distance and accuracy, no matter if you cast with spinning gear or conventional gear:

① EQUIPMENT: Surf rods tend to be longer (11-,12- up to 15-foot rods), and the length and strength of the rod you use affect the distance of your cast. Couture recommends rods of about 12 feet. Heavier power rods (a rod's power refers to how much force is needed to bend the rod) and heavier action rods (action refers to where the rod bends) tend to be stiffer, less flexible. A good surf rod needs to have flex so that part of the energy transferred to the cast comes from the rod whipping from a flexed position back to a straight position. With a stiffer rod, that energy comes predominantly from the strength of the caster. Thus, for greater distance, you want to combine the power of the caster and the power loaded in the rod. Many new surf rods are designed with faster action and lighter power in order to achieve maximum casting distance. Also, a more flexible rod tip is a more sensitive rod tip, which can be helpful in detecting lighter bites—particularly when rougher surf can conceal a timid bite.

Surf casters use both spinning reels and conventional casting reels. In Florida the preference seems to lean toward spinning reels. Spinning reels for surf casting should have a large line capacity since you want to be able to cast long distances. Likewise, they should have a wider face, allowing line to peel off the reel effortlessly when cast. Reels like Daiwa's Free Swimmer or their Saltist, Okuma's Rockaway Surf Reel, Penn's Spinfisher VI Long Cast or Slammer IV, and Shimano's Ultegra XTD are all reliable spinning surf casting reels. Couture favors reels in 8000 sizes in order to have correct line capacity and strength for fighting larger fish—but note that some companies classifications will offer similar characteristics under differing numericals. When it comes to conventional reels, you can't go wrong with Penn's Fathom II star drag, Daiwa's Sealine-X SHA30, or Steigler Star Mag.

② THE RIG'S WEIGHT: Think about how much weight your rig requires you to cast. Rigs with heavy sinkers and heavy baits can require more power to cast. Too often, I watch surf casters casting bottom rigs with 4-ounce sinkers and two large finger mullet from rods that struggle to lift the rig let alone cast it with the rod's full potential of energy.

Note, too, that your choice of sinker plays a big role in your ability to cast far. Sinkers should be selected based on the kind of bottom you're casting to and the amount of current pushing the sinker around. Bank sinkers, pyramid sinkers, storm sinker, grip sinkers (often called Sputnik or nail sinkers) all hold bottom differently, and they all have different aerodynamic qualities, as well, that can affect the distance of a cast. Couture, in fact, points to the aerodynamic qualities of Sputnik sinkers as central to his own successes in distance casting.



YOUR
RODS.
YOUR
WAY.
Elevate your fishing game with custom built rods.
PROKÖTE
PROKÖTE
Mud Hole
ROD BUILDING & TACKLE CRAFTING
MUDHOLE.COM

FISH MONKEY
HUNT MONKEY
PERFORMANCE
GLOVES AND SOCKS

We are
HUNT FISH

Introducing
Performance Wool
Fishing Socks
Made in the USA

100% Satisfaction Guaranteed
fishmonkeygloves.com

Surf Casting

③ CASTING FORM: As in fly casting (roll cast, double haul, reach cast, etc.), there are various named forms of surf casting: the pendulum cast, the Hatter cast, and the Brighton cast, for example. Most of us, though, tend to cast unconventionally, doing what feels right rather than employing casting best practices and, thus, don't achieve maximum distance or accuracy with our casts.

Because it is a good casting form for beginners and its techniques are fundamental to consistent and successful surf casting, the Brighton cast is a great cast to practice. For this cast, think of the place you are standing by the surf as a clock. You stand at the middle of the clock from where the hands of the clock turn. Your target spot in the water is 12:00.

If you are right-handed, stand with your left foot pointing to 12:00 (If you are left-handed, just adjust by 180 degrees). Your right foot should face 3:00 and your feet should be about shoulder length apart.

With your left hand on the rod butt and your right hand just above the reel seat, point the rod behind you, angled toward the sand, allowing the rig to lay in the sand at the 6:00 position.

> Think of the same kind of motion a lacrosse player uses to throw a ball from the pouch of the stick.

The rig should be about half of the length of the rod away from the rod tip.

Next, with the rig in the sand, shift the rod tip slightly to the 5:00 position, creating a little bit of tension between the rod tip and the rig.

With your right elbow bent, raise your left arm and the rod butt to about head height.

Now, look to your target spot and then raise your eyes to look above that spot, keeping your eyes on that elevated position. Eyes on the target.

Next, without stepping forward or allowing your feet to leave the ground, your casting motion should create a fulcrum/lever action with your right arm punching forward like a boxer's jab and your left hand and the rod butt pulling the rod butt back to you all in a single, fluid motion.

Neither of your hands should leave the rod. Too often I watch novice casters release the rod with their right hand, holding it only with their left hand. Pointing the rod out to sea like a medieval swordsman calling for a charge. Instead, think of casting as the same kind of motion a lacrosse player uses to throw a lacrosse ball from the pouch of the stick using a powerful snapping action of the right hand higher up on the stick while simultaneously snapping the stick's butt and the left hand back down.

Ultimately, this kind of surf casting allows you to load as much energy into the rod and then expel that energy in the cast in conjunction with the energy stored in your arms and shoulders. That is, a fishing rod is designed to transfer maximum energy from the flex of the rod into the distance of the cast. Too often, anglers do not take advantage of the rod's ability, worried about putting too much stress on the rod, and then not making use of the rod's full strength. Trust your equipment to deliver the energy to your cast.

Of course, like anything else, you can improve your casting by practicing. However, I am not a fan of the adage practice makes perfect, because as a violin teacher once told me, "Practice doesn't make perfect if you're practicing the wrong way of doing it." FS

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Here's a link to an illustrated tutorial of the Brighton cast at www.in-fisherman.com*

ROBALO

#ROBALONATION

THE BIGGEST ROBALO EVER

2023 CENTER CONSOLE

R360

ROBALO REEL DEAL

THE BEST PRICE. GUARANTEED.

POWERED BY YAMAHA

BUILD YOURS AT ROBALO.COM

36'6" (11.13M)	11'4" (3.45M)	14,500 LBS (6,577kg)	YACHT CERTIFIED
LENGTH	BEAM	WEIGHT	PASSENGER CAPACITY

2023 Model Year. Robalo NAP Reel Deal price includes twin Yamaha 425HP engines. Pricing does not include options, dealer prep and freight charges, fees for dealer installation of options, taxes, title, registration, documentation and licensing may vary by location and are in addition to prices shown. Photos may show optional equipment. Some equipment or engines offered may not be available in some states or require additional equipment at an added cost. See your dealer for details.

PARTICIPATING FLORIDA ROBALO DEALERS

APOPKA MARINE
Inverness, FL • 352-726-7773

BOATERS WORLD
Lake Placid, FL • 863-232-5661

BOB HEWES BOATS
N. Miami, FL • 305-681-6602
Pompano, FL • 954-582-3399

DEALERS CHOICE MARINE
Orlando, FL • 407-354-3300

ERICKSON MARINE
Sarasota, FL • 941-365-4444

FISH TALE BOATS
Fort Myers, FL • 239-309-2804
Naples, FL • 239-309-2804

FUTCH'S MARINE DEPOT
Gainesville, FL • 352-372-4900

INDIAN SPRINGS MARINA
Largo, FL • 813-575-6419

JACKSONVILLE BOAT SALES
Jacksonville, FL • 904-717-6272

MIKES MARINE SUPPLY
Panacea, FL • 850-984-5637

RIVA MOTORSPORTS
Key Largo, FL • 305-451-3320

SOUTH FLORIDA YACHTS
Lake Park, FL • 561-844-4109
Stuart, FL • 772-600-7748

SUNRISE MARINE
Mary Ester, FL • 850-243-0414
Daphne, AL • 251-626-4844

VERO MARINE CENTER
Vero Beach, FL • 772-562-7922

Get the Edge

FILLET KNIVES ARE LARGELY A MATTER OF PERSONAL CHOICE, BUT THERE ARE FACTORS TO CONSIDER.

BY TIM L. LEWIS

For thick-skin, heavily scaled fish such as this tripletail, some anglers start with a serrated blade (Forschner with black handle) and finish with a conventional blade (Dexter-Russell, white poly handle).

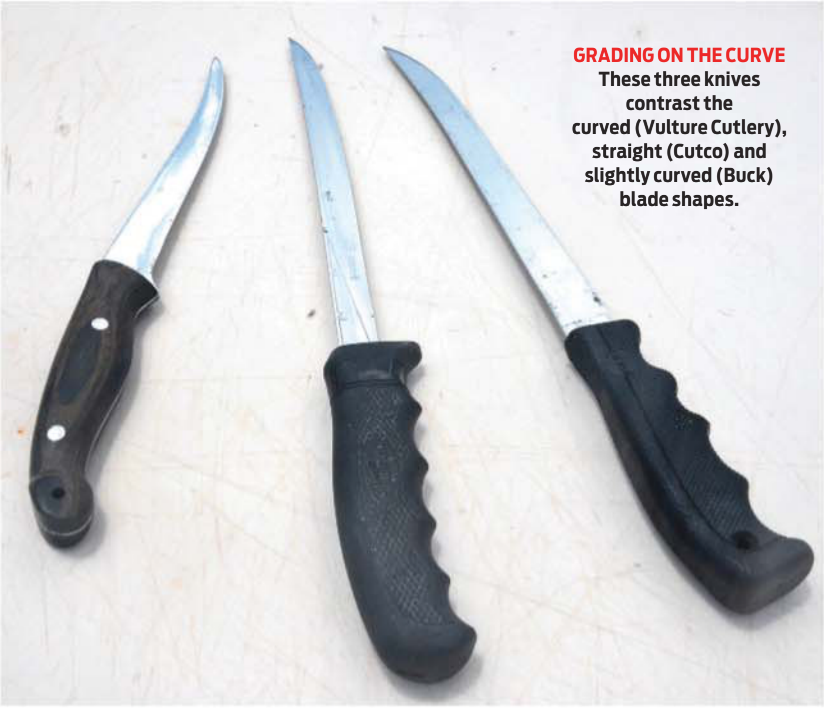
What knife is best for each fish-cleaning chore? How many knives does an angler need? How do we best maintain a sharp edge? Is corrosion resistance or ease of sharpening more important? Are electric knives valuable tools or superfluous luxuries? I put these questions and more to both fishermen and manufacturers, receiving some answers you would expect and some you may not. Not surprisingly, while everyone has strong beliefs, these views are not identical. Happily, many companies and small manufacturers produce fillet knives. Most offer several models, making it easy to find one or a series ideally suited to an angler's personal needs. The trick is to avoid buying ten to find each one.

Captain Roddy Corr, who in his younger days worked commercially cleaning fish and currently spends an average of 200 days a year fishing out of East Central Florida, prefers a blade with very little curvature and has found the 8-inch model 1378 Dexter fits his needs perfectly. For care of this carbon steel blade, he simply wipes it with a little olive oil after cleaning and drying it. As far as stainless knives go, he doesn't believe they hold an edge as well and are harder to sharpen. Corr sharpens his knife at a very acute angle. He admits the thick bones of big tuna, cobia, and sow snapper can dull the super-fine edge, but he mostly cuts around bones rather than through them and the thin edge is easily and quickly re-established with two or three strokes on a whetstone.

Dan “DQ” Quinn, Director of Field Promotions, Rapala USA, shared insights he has gained on fishing knives. On the subject of blade stiffness, he says, “For larger fish, or fish with bones, you’ll want a more stiff, less flex knife. For smaller fish, when you’re working with tighter spots, you’ll want a smaller, thinner blade that offers more flexibility.” Likewise, he advocates shorter blades for smaller fish and longer ones for larger fish. While Captain Corr prefers a straight blade, Dan explained, “A curved blade maximizes the knife’s cutting edge and allows for more precise cutting. This, in turn, creates more efficiency for the person filleting the fish.”

Rapala offers many styles and sizes. For instance, the Salt Angler’s Slim Fillet Knife and the Salt Angler’s Straight Fillet Knife both are available in 6.5- or 8-inch lengths. For cutting through bones in larger fish, Dan recommended the Angler’s Curved Fillet Knife.

I have fished with Maath Bennet for over 30 years and have always been impressed with his skill and knowledge. He typically brings three knives when cleaning a cart of fish. Like Roddy Corr, he favors a 1378 8-inch Dexter, but augments this knife with a Silver Stag and a serrated edge fillet knife. He states the serrated blade knocks fillets off cobia and big snapper and such much more quickly and easily. Then he can return to his normal knives to complete the job, skinning, deboning, and removing the blood lines. He rarely sharpens the serrated knife but hones the other two at home with a belt sharpener, starting with 600 grit and working in steps to 1,000 grit, and finally polishing the edge on leather. At the cleaning station, he touches up the edge with a fine diamond-impregnated steel as needed. This typically means after four or five fish. The Silver Stag is stainless, and while he is aware the Dexter takes an edge a bit more readily, he feels the Stag holds the edge as well. As far as worries about rust with the carbon steel, Maath declares it is not an issue because he cleans, dries and oils all the knives after each use. The wood and stag handles also receive a coating of oil.

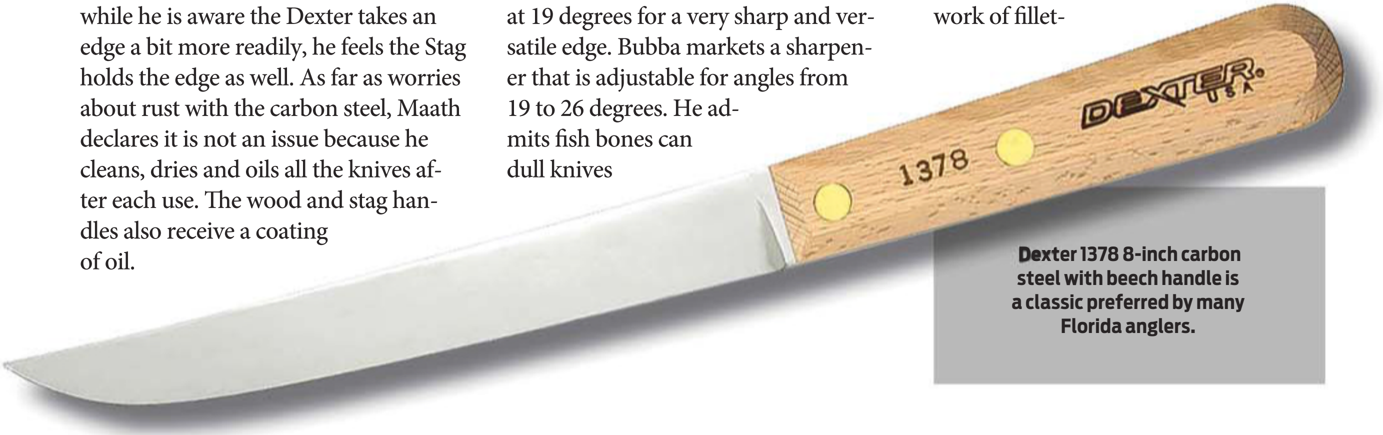


GRADING ON THE CURVE

These three knives contrast the curved (Vulture Cutlery), straight (Cutco) and slightly curved (Buck) blade shapes.

Isaac Brizendine, a Bubba brand representative, explained that flexibility is a key component of a good fillet knife, allowing both the user to follow the curvature of the bones, maximizing yields, and the knife blade be to pushed or flexed against the skin when skinning fillets. He believes increased stiffness is helpful for a blade used to cut through bones in bigger fish. For most Florida fish-cleaning shores, Isaac suggests being ready for different fish sizes and species with four models: the 7-inch Tapered Flex, 8-inch Ultra Flex, 9-inch Serrated Flex, and 9-inch Stiff. For anglers who do not wish to purchase them separately, Bubba created a Multi-Flex Kit that contains these four interchangeable, full-tang blades and a non-slip grip handle. Isaac shed light on blade curvature, stating that the straight part of the blade is great for slicing or cutting large sections, while curved portions allow the angler to cut into tight areas. Isaac sharpens his knives at 19 degrees for a very sharp and versatile edge. Bubba markets a sharpener that is adjustable for angles from 19 to 26 degrees. He admits fish bones can dull knives more readily than flesh, re-emphasizing the desirability of a stiffer blade when cutting through a lot of bone. Bubba’s blades are fashioned from high carbon stainless steel with a titanium nitride coating to provide corrosion resistance as well as a sharp edge that lasts and resharpens easily.

When I asked Roddy Corr his thoughts on electric knives, he responded that the electric knives he has seen in action seemed to hack up the fish, wasting good meat. I, too, thought of them as gimmicks and gadgets. Of course, Roddy and I have been using traditional knives our whole lives and rightfully feel some pride in our abilities, maybe a bit like John Henry and his conviction a hammer in muscular hands would triumph over machinery! However, after talking with manufacturers and seeing pictures of electric knives in action, I would like to try one myself. DQ, from Rapala, declared electric power makes fast work of fillet-



Dexter 1378 8-inch carbon steel with beech handle is a classic preferred by many Florida anglers.

RAPALA
R12HD

All CHARGED UP
Electric knife with serrated blade for a big haul of sheepshead, shellcracker or other scaly panfish. Rechargeable R12 Heavy Duty model from Rapala.

ing fish, and he mentioned the Rapala models with modern lithium battery power can go wherever the fisherman ventures. Isaac, from Bubba, likewise stated electric knives are faster and more effortless, typically used by people cleaning large quantities of fish from fresh or saltwater. He touted the ergonomics and torque of their electric knives. Bubba also offers cordless models.

My own armamentarium for tackling cleaning chores? Like many, I grew up with Rapalas (my first at age five). Nowadays, my favorite knife is one given to me by my wife who discovered it at an art show! Hardly where a fisherman would expect to find quality gear, but that knife has performed well for thirty years. Crafted by Bruce Goers (Vulture Cutlery), it sports a six and a quarter-inch (may have been longer originally) curved, stainless blade with a hardwood handle. Like DQ and Isaac, I find the curvature of the blade wonderfully helpful. Usually, it is the only tool I need. If we have had an extremely good day, I will carry a second knife or a steel.

BUBBA
BUBBA

Cordless electric knife in action, this one a Bubba brand model.

CUT RESISTANT
GRIPPER SERIES
FISH
MONKEY

Grippy gloves are preferred by some anglers, and there are some made of cut-resistant materials.

My preferred backup knife is an old carbon steel knife I discovered one day in my dad's toolbox. Its blade is thin, long, and flexible and sharpens like a dream. I have found, like Maath and Roddy, that carbon steel is not difficult to keep rust free since I always wash and dry my knives after use. (On the other hand, bait knives left in the boat are constantly challenged by the environment and I strongly prefer stainless for them.)

I have two other fillet knives, both gifts. One, a Buck, takes a nice edge. However, the 9-inch blade is awkward for me and somehow makes filleting slower. The other is a Cutco. This knife is interesting because the blade can be adjusted to any length between 6 and 9 inches.

A couple of accessories bear mentioning. DQ of Rapala strongly endorses fillet gloves, both to more readily grip the fish, and to protect the angler from cuts. The Rapala brand is machine washable. Rapala makes a two-stage sharpener that is simple to use and quickly restores the edge. DQ felt anglers might be interested to learn Rapala offers sheaths with features like safety belt loops and ventilation for speedy drying. By the way, the sheath on my Cutco has been well-engineered; as well as protecting the knife, it serves, plier-fashion, as a fish gripper and has a built-in line clipper, whetstone, and hook sharpener. It can even be used to lip fish when lifting from the water or holding to dehook. As mentioned earlier, Bubba makes a sharpener designed for their knives.

The more anglers questioned, surely the more knives would be listed for Florida fishermen are definitely a group of individuals, but the above ideas can point toward what might work best for you. FS

SCAN TO REGISTER

1973–2023

nwtf

CONVENTION & SPORT SHOW

Feb. 15-19, 2023
Sport Show Feb. 16-18

Don't Miss the NWTF Convention & Sport Show

Join us in Nashville, Tennessee, for one of the biggest outdoor shows in the country featuring newly released fishing and hunting supplies, limited-edition guns, original artwork, jewelry, outdoor equipment and much more.

The massive Sport Show floor showcases 400-plus vendors and is open Thursday, Feb. 16 through Saturday, Feb. 18.

50

Celebrate with us this year as we commemorate NWTF's 50th Anniversary and honor conservation and hunting's most devoted supporters.

MOSSY OAK

| Official Convention Sponsor |

Jon Cox, an Elite Series bass pro from Florida, says the 65- to 72-degree temp range is ideal for all-day bites in areas where bass are bedding.

Bed Fishing: A Calculated Approach

HOW PROS ACCOUNT FOR LOCATION, WATER TEMP, VISIBILITY, FISHING PRESSURE & OTHER FACTORS DURING THE BASS SPAWN.

BY DAVID A. BROWN

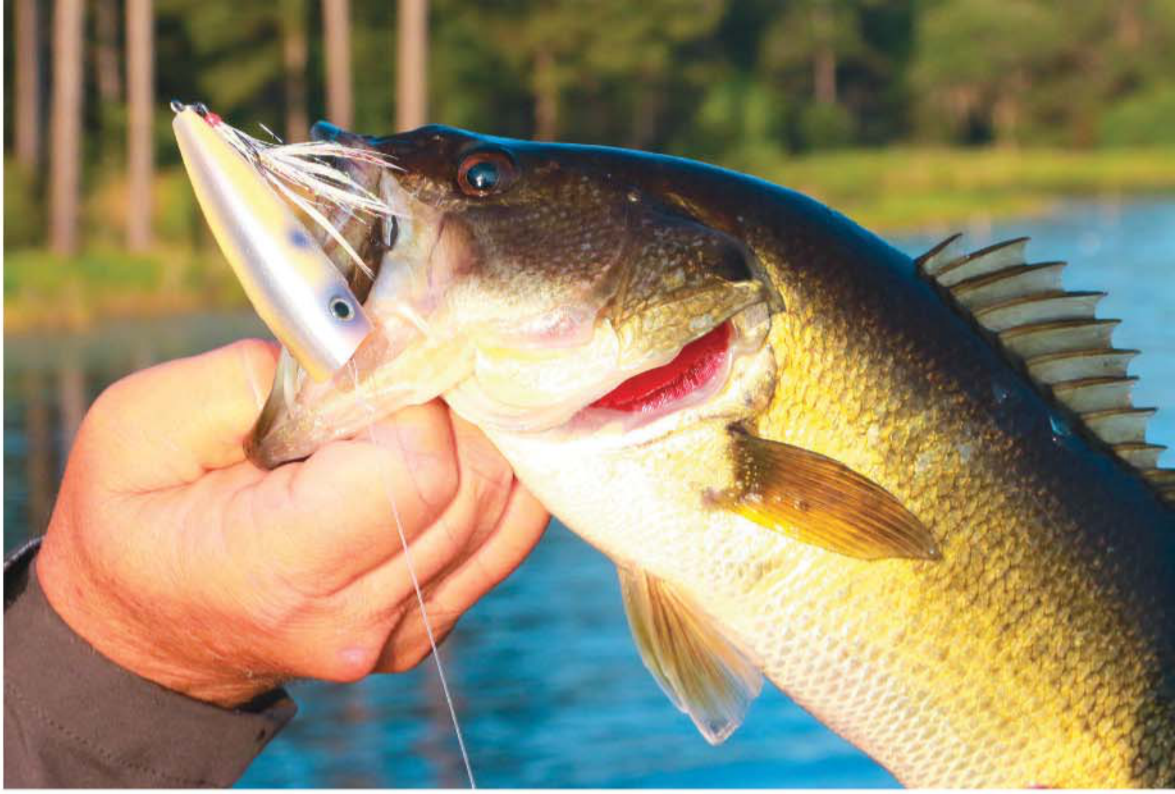
Get the camera ready, because the Florida bass spawn spikes your chances of catching a personal best. For the optimal timing, locations, bait selection and presentations, we quizzed some of the state's top bass pros. Their consensus: If you want to consistently score big catches during the spawning season, you need to understand these key variables.

LIKELY LOCATIONS

Some bass beds are easy to find, but that doesn't mean the fish will be easy to catch. It's nice when you find that yellowish/white circle contrasting with darker bottom, but the obvious ones may hold fish supremely challenging in their vulnerable position. Bassmaster Elite Cliff Prince of Palatka won't ignore easy targets, but he's all about maximizing his time through realistic assessments.

"If she doesn't bite in 10 minutes, that fish may not be catchable," Prince said.

The uncooperative mood could be the new arrival jitters, but the fish might have already seen a bait or two; or maybe



Left: Creature bait rigged on sturdy hook with tungsten lead for slow fishing through beds. Above: Topwater earns a strike from a defensive fish during the spawning season.

the nest-raiding bluegill have been giving her fits that morning. Whatever the case, bed fish mood can vary widely.

Florida's bounty of native and non-native vegetation offers year-round bass habitat, with certain areas coming into play for particular spawn-relevant reasons.

Sun exposure plays a big role here, but so does clarity. Bernie Schultz, the Elite veteran from Gainesville, points out that a lake's northwest bank will be shielded from a cold front's hard north wind, and water quality in this sector tends to remain viable. Beyond this, Schultz favors protected canals and grass-filtered areas, like the spaces between outside grass lines and progressively shallower vegetation.

"Places I look for are what I call 'stove pipes'— round holes in vegetation, whether it's hydrilla, eel grass, maidencane, or reeds, fish will find a small hole or open area in the grass," Schultz said. "It can be the size of a saucepan or it can be 3 feet across, but they'll generally be in those open areas within the interior of any grass bed."

Similar private chambers occur deep within vast stands of cattails. About five years ago, I watched Roland and Scott Martin pick off spawners by nearly disappearing within mini forests of Lake Okeechobee's vertical cover.

Now, even when water clarity is good, thick layers of detritus ("muck") coating many Florida lakes challenge bass to find suitable spawning sites. Here, Elite pro John Cox looks to lily pad roots, logs and cypress knees, where elevated solid surfaces accommodate the fish's needs.

TIME AND TEMPERATURE

In northern latitudes, well-defined seasons compact the spawning window into a tight period. Florida bass don't feel such urgency, so they can afford to be more selective in their timing.

"The spawn in Florida can be a relatively long window and early in you have to pick and choose your days," Shultz said. "If it's cold, your best activity will be later in the day when the water temperature warms."

Cox agrees and dives even deeper. In his experience, early spring water temperatures in the low to mid 60s favor the afternoon, while the latter end of the major spawning season finds water tem-

Fish spooks and returns? **Stay off where that fish can't see you** and you may catch it.

peratures in the upper 70s flipping the preference to morning hours.

"During the heart of the spawn, when water temps are in that 65- to 72-degree range, it's all day long," Cox said.

WEATHER WOES

Late-season cold fronts can be a buzzkill. When the temperature drops, skies clear and winds die off, otherwise aggressive fish assume full-blown lockjaw.

"Fish sometimes will get off the beds and even move away from the spawning area under severe cold fronts," Schultz said. "They might go to the thickest cover nearby, or they may go offshore. When the temperature gets right, you'll see the males show up and then the females will be behind them. If you have consecutive days of warming, the fish are going to start showing up. But if you have cold fronts one after another, you're probably going to be better off looking in areas adjacent to the spawning areas. Think matted hyacinths, matted hydrilla, maidencane, eel grass, docks, cypress trees and other cover."

While classic bed fishing takes a hard pause during a frontal cycle, some of these displaced fish are still catchable. Try punching a smaller creature bait through mats near a spawning area, pitching a jig or an unweighted stick worm around cypress trees, or skipping a wacky rigged Yamamoto Thin Senko near heat-holding cypress trees and docks.

READING THE TELLS

Fishing for bedding bass is a poker game. Success or failure depends on reading your opponent's actions—particularly their response to yours.

The approach and initial observation are critical. In search mode, ease along on low, consistent trolling motor, avoiding pulses that put fish on high alert. If you inadvertently spook a bed fish, don't assume it's game over. Wait, watch, evaluate.

If a fish bolts, and you return to the bed after several minutes to find it's still gone, this one's a waste of time. Conversely, a fish that spooks, but runs right back in a matter of seconds, is a hot fish that's very likely to bite.

"If I see a fish that I know is on a bed and it spooks," said Prince, "if I leave it and come back and that fish has returned to the bed, I feel like that fish is still catchable. Back away from them and stay off where the fish can't see you, and you may catch that fish."

When Prince finds a locked-down bass, he makes patient, repetitive presentations, each about 2 inches from the previous one until he finds the specific spot the fish is guarding. He knows he's on the money when the fish's posture switches from nervous and irritable to focused and menacing.

"I like to see a fish react to my bait and by that, I mean she doesn't swim away from it; she goes toward it," Prince said. "If she ever goes toward the bait, that's a sign that fish is getting aggressive. If she ever spins around on it really quick, that's a definite sign she doesn't like the bait where it's at."

While close range sight fishing rarely requires more than about a ⅛-ounce weight, Prince bumps up to ⅜ when blind casting to a nervous bed fish. Using a visual reference, he'll cast beyond the bed and slowly drag his bait until he feels it dip into the kill zone.

BAIT SELECTIONS

Flipping/pitching Texas-rigged plastics such as beaver style baits and stick worms probably accounts for the largest number of bed fish catches, but that's not the only game. The bottom rightfully sees the majority of focus, but dropshotting a worm or wiggly creature bait a few inches higher in the water parks a threatening form where it's often staring a fish right in the face.

Schultz said a suspending jerkbait like Shimano's flashy World Minnow can serve a similar purpose. And don't overlook the taunting impact of a topwater bait hovering over a nest. With propbaits, Schultz recommends a two-stage strategy: Use those gurgling props to attract attention on the approach, then park the bait. In a bedding scenario, a static presentation that remains on target is better than a noisy but relatively brief pass-through.

Best piece of advice from the pros? Schultz offers this parting tip: "Whether you're fishing from the bank or from a boat, try to put some distance between you and the fish, so it doesn't detect your movement. That's especially true if the fish are free roaming in clear water and they're not under heavy cover, when they're in those void areas where they're going to build their beds." FS

RECON PATROL

BECAUSE FLORIDA'S SPAWN can span half the year or more, there's a strong likelihood of finding one wave of fish in the maternity ward with another in the waiting room. Those staging post-spawners offer incredible opportunity.

You won't go wrong with the highly effective duo comprising a moving "locator" bait and a quick shot targeting bait. Start with some type of weedless swimbait in the 4- to 5-inch range and use this to cover water and search for fish that are likely set up just outside the spawning areas.

Remember, pre-spawners will still eat aggressively, but as they edge closer to the beds, they become highly territorial. For their solitude and, ultimately, their egg protection, these fish will chase off any intruders. Sometimes it's a kill shot, other times, just a big "Shoo!"

Cliff Prince, the Bassmaster Elite from Palatka likes a 5-inch Bass Assassin Boss swimbait on a 5/0 belly-weighted hook. Prince also knows a ChatterBait with a 4-inch Bass Assassin Little Boss can be highly effective at triggering fish sitting off the beds.

"Even topwaters, sometimes a fish will come up and show herself. They don't like them in their spawning area for sure. If the fish doesn't commit, I'll throw a wacky-rigged 4-inch worm or a fluke."

You'll also find a wacky rig handy for sight casting to cruising fish. Idling through a shallow spawning pocket, you'll often spot fish scoping out the area and offering prime targets for an unobtrusive bait that skips well, falls relatively lightly and emits the kind of enticing wiggle that pushes even a nervous fish over the edge. *— David A. Brown*

MAKING MEMORIES, ONE LINE AT A TIME.

SX 240
SKEETER
YAMAHA

TEAMING UP WITH THE BEST SKEETER BUILT® HUMMINBIRD. MINN KOTA®

YAMAHA
Revs Your Heart

SKEETERBOATS.COM

SKEETER®
PERFORMANCE FISHING BOATS

STRONGEST WARRANTY IN THE INDUSTRY

LIMITED LIFETIME WARRANTY
Limited Lifetime Structural Warranty‡
10 Year Limited Transferable Structural Warranty
3 Year Limited Component Warranty

Strongest warranty compared to three of our leading competitors.
‡For the original purchaser; complete details in written Limited Warranty.

Visit Us On

©2023 Skeeter Products, Inc. All rights reserved. This document contains many of Skeeter's valuable trademarks. It may also contain trademarks belonging to other companies. Any references to other companies or their products are for identification purposes only, and are not intended to be an endorsement. Remember to observe all applicable boating laws. Never ride after consuming alcohol or drugs. Dress properly with a USCG-approved flotation device and protective gear. Boats may be shown with optional equipment. See your local Skeeter dealer for complete details.

ALL SALTWATER
ALL MORNING LONG

The saltwater lifestyle comes alive every Saturday morning on Outdoor Channel. Savvy anglers Carter Andrews, Rob Fordyce, Mark Davis, George Gozdz, and Jack Carlson — plus Jon Brunson of *Spear Life* — pursue exotic species in some of the world's most amazing destinations.

SALTWATER SATURDAYS

BEGINS 9A ET

Outdoor

TWO CONCHS SPORTFISHING TV

BIGWATER ADVENTURES

THE SEAHUNTER

THE OBSESSION OF CARTER ANDREWS

UNFATHOMED

SPEAR LIFE

ACTION SPOTTER

OUR REGIONAL EXPERTS GUIDE YOU TO THE HOTSPOTS

KEYS 62
KEY LARGO TO KEY WEST

SOUTH 64
DEERFIELD BEACH TO HOMESTEAD AND FLAMINGO

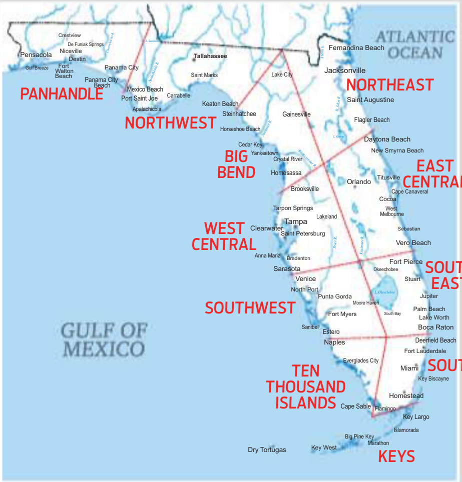
10,000 ISLANDS 66
NAPLES TO CAPE SABLE

SOUTHEAST 68
FORT PIERCE TO BOCA RATON

SOUTHWEST 70
VENICE TO ESTERO

WEST CENTRAL 72
TARPON SPRINGS TO SARASOTA

BIG BEND 74
STEINHATCHEE TO HOMOSASSA


ATLANTIC OCEAN
GULF OF MEXICO
PANHANDLE
NORTHWEST
NORTHEAST
BIG BEND
EAST CENTRAL
WEST CENTRAL
SOUTH EAST
SOUTHWEST
TEN THOUSAND ISLANDS
SOUTH
KEYS
Pensacola
Tallahassee
Jacksonville
Saint Augustine
Gainesville
Daytona Beach
Orlando
Tampa
Sarasota
Venice
Fort Pierce
Naples
Miami
Homestead
Key West
Dry Tortugas

EAST CENTRAL 76
DAYTONA BEACH TO VERO BEACH

NORTHEAST 78
FERNANDINA BEACH TO FLAGLER BEACH

NORTHWEST 80
MEXICO BEACH TO KEATON BEACH

PANHANDLE 82
PENSACOLA TO PANAMA CITY BEACH

TROPICS 84
THE BAHAMAS AND BEYOND

SEND US YOUR PHOTOS We welcome your fishing and hunting photos for publication in the Action Spotter and in our online community galleries at www.floridasportsman.com. **SEND DIGITAL PICTURES**, 600 KB to 1 MB in jpeg format. For smartphone photos, email the Actual Size—highest resolution. Images must not have appeared or been submitted elsewhere. Send photos to: photos@floridasportsman.com. **INCLUDE NAMES** of people pictured, hometowns, location of catch and any key details, such as weight of big catches.

CATCH MORE ONLINE Fish and hunt smarter and more efficiently. Check our daily "feed" to get on the best bets and top seasonal picks for all regions of Florida. And be sure to share your pictures and stories with us!

KEYS KEY LARGO TO KEY WEST

Homestead
GULF OF MEXICO
Cape Sable
Flamingo
Key Largo
Islamorada
Big Pine Key
Marathon
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Key West

BY PEPE GONZALEZ
pepeskeywestcharter.com
(305) 304-0983

Beat the Winter Blues with Sailfish, Snapper, Wahoo, and Kingfish

It's time to break out the foul weather gear because the next couple of months will be cold and windy at times. On the offshore front, blackfin tuna, sailfish, kingfish and wahoo will be chewing the bottom of the boat, but you will have to earn it! Expect conditions to be quite sporty at times, if not downright rough.

Up north they have Punxsutawney Phil to predict the early arrival of spring. In the Florida Keys, we have a tarpon biomass that can show up overnight if the weather warms up a bit. This usually doesn't happen until the second week of February, and it can produce a solid winter bite. But it won't last long—as soon as the next cold front pushes down through the Keys archipelago the water temperature will rapidly drop, and the tarpon will retreat once again until the wind clocks around and blows out of the southeast again.

Sailfishing in the Florida Keys hasn't quite peaked yet and anglers can look forward to consistent action with sails showering ballyhoo schools in shallow water just off the reef line. Ideal conditions come together when blue water from the Gulf Stream mixes with green water from Florida Bay and anglers can sight cast to fish swimming in and

BEST BET

February is renowned for canceled fishing trips. Having an open mind goes a long way, but if you don't care about rough weather, the **sailfish** bite is in full swing. Once you have a few dozen ballyhoo in the livewell get outside the reef and look for a color change. Keep an eye out for dipping frigate birds. I usually start in around 150 feet of water.

Many wahoo are taken off Key West's outer reefs during the days before and after the full moon in February.

out of the color changes.

This time of the year there are also a lot of king mackerel in both Atlantic and Gulf waters. These fish are aggressive and known for their explosive runs that are sure to thrill seasoned veterans as well as novice anglers. The charterboat fleet is keen to the location of king mackerel and when large schools are found, limiting out is common. In Monroe County, the minimum size limit is 24 inches, with 3 fish allowed per person.

It's no surprise that many kingfish tournaments are held in Key West during the winter—we have some of the biggest kings in the country staging in our waters before commencing their annual migration in the Gulf. Smoker kings over 50 pounds are common. With a mouth full of teeth, kings require a wire leader unless you get lucky and hook one perfectly on the lip outside of its mouth. My preferred way to catch kingfish is with big live baits like blue runners and speedos. Depending on the size of the bait I will make a wire stinger rig with two or three treble hooks spaced about four inches apart from each other. A 5-foot length of single-strand wire leader with a barrel swivel connecting to the main line prevents cut-offs as fish violently attack live baits and wildly sky out of the water. When fishing the Atlantic side look for kingfish along the reef edge out to about 150 feet of water.

Another great area that produces fish in February is the shallow inshore patches, with the preferred method anchoring and chumming. You can expect to catch the usual variety of snapper, grouper, jacks and porgies. A unique species we catch in the winter is the cero mackerel. Average ceros weigh around 5 pounds but in the Lower Keys they can be much larger exceeding 10 pounds. Freelining live ballyhoo on a 12 inch trace of wire and 3/0 treble hook will bring one of the tastiest mackerels to the boat.

Patch reef fishing is a Keys-wide fishery; spots up and down the chain can easily be found on your chartplotter. I like to anchor up-current from the spots so you can freeline baits with the current and draw fish out of the structure. This method allows me to keep the fish out of the reef, therefore increasing my chances of landing them. You can also put a line with a weight on the bottom to tempt grouper—but remember you'll have to release them until the season reopens in May. No matter what you are fishing for don't forget the fluorocarbon leader; it's a must in the Florida Keys! I use Vanish.

I prefer spinning gear for freelining on the patch reefs. It gives my clients the ability to cast and when a fish strikes, they can easily close the bail and reel. My go-to outfit for patch reef fishing is the 4500 Penn Slammer IV paired with a Carnage II, 7-foot medium action rod. This outfit delivers plenty of sensitivity as well as sufficient backbone to keep the bottom dwellers out of the rocks.

Flats fishing is difficult in February and water temperature is a driving factor in finding life in the shallows. Leeward shorelines allow flats to heat and hold warmth longer with the benefit of being blocked by the wind. And flats with oceanside influence typically supply more stable conditions as they deliver warm ocean water compared to rising tides from the colder waters of Florida Bay. Additionally, many Florida Keys oceanside flats are in the lee when north winds ramp up, which is the prevailing direction in February.

DIVING Definitely not my cup of tea but to each their own. It's really not that cold in the Keys compared to other regions of the country that have to shovel snow, but I need to put on some serious rubber if I'm getting in the water in February. Finding decent visibility may be a struggle, but it is not impossible. The leeward side of the Keys island chain is a good place to start, also staying away from channels that carry dirty water from the Gulf will help. Spiny lobster season is open until the end of March and there's very little pressure on them. Hogfish and grouper are off-limits until May 1.

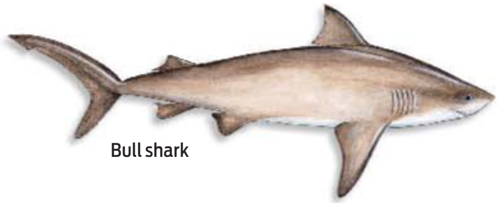
WINDY RETREAT

ISLAMORADA @CATCHING_ASTRID

With wind in the forecast, it's best to find shelter and stick close to the mangroves, as in mangrove snapper. Astrid deGruchy caught this big mangrove snapper in Islamorada with Captain Brandon Storin (@bnmbean) using a shrimp-tipped jighead.

Deerfield Beach
Fort Lauderdale
Miami
Key Biscayne
Homestead
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Flamingo
Key Largo

BY ALAN SHERMAN
getemsportfishing.com
(786) 436-2064



Bull shark

BEST BET

Sharks have become a real problem in South Florida. From the inshore waters of Florida Bay to the highly trafficked ICW, along our beaches and out as far as you want to go into the deep blue, sharks can be encountered any day on the water. If you enjoy swimming, snorkeling, or scuba diving, do not worry. Shark bites are rare in South Florida—unless you are a fish.

Fortunately, shark fishing is a blast. These apex predators strike hard and fight all the way to the boat. They aren't particularly picky about bait or rigging and many sharks are edible and make great table fare. Read up on the regulations and prohibited species before soaking any bait. Shark fishing from shore? Be sure to take the shark-smart fishing educational course at www.mfwc.com/sharkcourse to earn your shore-based shark fishing permit, which must be renewed annually.

Anglers sight fishing in Florida Bay have recently experienced a dramatic increase in shallow water shark encounters.

Winter Playground for Fish and Fishermen

It may not feel like it, but winter has been here for months. If you are familiar with South Florida weather, then you know that our winter is far from normal. Regardless of how mild our winter is, there are many changes when it comes to fishing in February compared to October.

The baitfish schools and the predators that were following them during what was a phenomenal fall migration this past year have now settled into the Florida Keys, Gulf of Mexico, and Florida Bay. Within a month these predators, much larger from feeding on the vast schools of baitfish, will be returning to our region as they head north for the summer. So, for now, we must take advantage of the fish that live here year-round or were lazy and decided to overwinter in South Florida.

Offshore anglers can look forward to action from sailfish, kingfish, dolphin, blackfin, wahoo, and ample sharks. Over the deeper rockpiles and artificial reefs, big amberjack, almaco, cobia, mutton and vermillion snapper, and more sharks will all be available. It's also a great time to target big swordfish on the bottom in 1,800 feet of water during the daytime. Stitched baits, preferably fresh bonito or dolphin bellies, must be rigged with perfection if you stand a chance with one of the meanest fish in the ocean, but driving is 90 percent of this game. When deploying a daytime swordfish bait you'll want to motor north with the Gulf Stream current. After you've attached the weight to the end of your wind-on leader let the rig plummet to the depths under slight tension. Halfway to the bottom, the helmsman will turn the boat 180 degrees and power into the current. While maintaining a heading and driving toward the belly of line, drop in freespool until you hit bottom.

Inshore fishermen will have many opportunities to catch seatrout over the grassflats in both north and south Biscayne Bay. Snook are more elusive but can be found up in the residential canals and in Maule Lake and Dumbfoundling Bay. Plenty of jack crevalle, ladyfish, and barracuda are always in these waters, too. Snapper and groupers like the cooler water temperatures and can be found around the rocky areas of the north and south sections of the bay. Spanish mackerel and bluefish once plentiful in our waters have been quite scarce recently. Hopefully, this year will be different with lots of these fish working the baitfish schools in the bay. Bonefish favor the southern stretches of Biscayne Bay, particularly along the warmer oceanside flats south of Soldier Key. Foraging bonefish require some sort of water flow and without it, you are simply wasting your time. If you find yourself working a flat with minimal tidal movement, such as what occurs during a slack tide, then it is time to move on and locate an area with noticeable water flow, such as a narrow channel or cut between spoil islands.

Nighttime snook and tarpon can be targeted along many of the bridges, under the lighted docks, and in our ocean inlets. A large live shrimp is deadly this time of year. Government Cut is the epicenter of the action, but you'll likely notice tarpon rolling around Haulover Inlet, the Venetian Causeway, the MacArthur Causeway, and also near Bayside Marina.

Flamingo in Everglades National Park is one of the most beautiful destinations we have to offer in South Florida, especially in February. The colder weather up north has sent thousands of migrating birds into the park, and they can be seen along the 38-mile stretch starting at the park's entrance and ending at the Flamingo campground. On the road into the park you might spot deer, raccoons, possums, bobcats, panthers, marsh rabbits, alligators, bald eagles, Everglades kites, blue herons, egrets, ospreys, pythons, and more. From the water, sharks, crocodiles, manatees, sea turtles, and endangered smalltooth sawfish can be encountered. Kayaks, canoes, and boats can all provide outstanding opportunities to view native wildlife. The fishing is also fantastic in February with lower water temperatures pushing snook, tarpon, redfish, black drum, sheepshead, seatrout and many others into the creeks and canals along the coast from Flamingo to Lostman's River and into the backcountry of Whitewater and Oyster bays. This National Park is so special due to the huge amount of wildlife one can encounter in one day. But why limit your adventure to one day. Your park pass is good for a week!

Mutton snapper and kingfish fill South Florida's mixed winter bag.

Freshwater fishing in our area can be outstanding this month. It all depends on whether the water level drops in the Everglades Water Conservation Areas from what it was months ago. If this happens, then look for loads of largemouth bass, peacock bass, panfish, gar, pickerel, cichlid, oscar, and mudfish to be competing for the food that has been forced off the flats into the canal systems. One hundred fish days per person are common this time of year. Hit the Tamiami Trail canals, L-67, L-28, Mac's Fishing Camp, Holiday Park, Alligator Alley, Route 27 canals, and Sawgrass Recreation Park for best results.

And you surely don't want to miss the Miami International Boat Show, which is returning to the convention center February 15-19. With so much going on, it's a great time to be in South Florida.

HUNTING Youths 15 years and under, with adult supervision, can hunt turkey on February 25 and 26 south of State Road 70. The general gun season stays open in Zone B until February 19. Gray squirrel and quail season is open until March 5. On February 4 and 5, veterans and active military can hunt waterfowl.

BIG SHRIMPIN'

MIAMI, Debbie Klammer

"We ended up with about 40 shrimp that night, it was 2 nights after the full moon, about 75 degrees, and they really started to run about an hour before slack tide, which was just after midnight. It was our first trip out with our new nets from Marker 69. It was late February, and we were near the Venetian Bridge."

ACTION SPOTTER

Naples
Everglades City
GULF OF MEXICO
Cape Sable

BY MATT STURDIVENT
oldfloridaangling.com
(239) 272-8443

BEST BET

Along the southwest coast of Florida, **seatrout** are mostly unaffected by winter weather and there are quite a few ways to catch them. With seasonally lower water levels it is a good idea to check out the deeper channels and passes. Dismal Key Pass and West Pass will hold schooling trout as the low tide forces the fish to vacate the flats. Look for trout around current breaks facing into the tide. In the South management zone, anglers may harvest three seatrout per person within a slot size limit from 15 to 19 inches total length.

> “A chartreuse Strike King Redfish Magic ⅛-ounce jighead with **a 3-inch Gulp! shrimp in molting color is a lethal combination** for trout out front.

Between cold fronts the winds subside, the temperature gradually warms, and snook feed aggressively.

Warming Up to the End of Winter

I get asked very often on fishing trips, “What is your favorite month to fish down here?” Honestly, February is never an answer to that question! But before we totally write off this month and pray for spring to arrive early, let’s talk about what you can expect during the coming weeks.

Stone crabs are in full swing as we welcome the Everglades City Seafood Festival on February 17-19. We welcome you to gather around the new radio tower and enjoy live music, a craft show, and delicious seafood. Leading up to this highly anticipated event, stone crab traps have been soaking in the Gulf’s coastal waters, with trap buoys dotting the surface until May and offering the perfect structure for tripletail.

Even during the harshest Florida winter, inclement weather is regularly interrupted by periods of clear skies, which will make for easier sight fishing of tripletail. Since the buoy lines stretch for miles and not every trap holds life, run on a slow plane about 50 feet from the buoys to get a clear view of what’s hovering below. Having the sun behind you will help tremendously. Another noteworthy idea would be to check out all the blown-down brush and debris left over from Hurricane Ian. Fallen trees sticking far out on mangrove points can be a magnet for big tripletail. Wherever you find a lazy tripletail, as per usual, nothing beats a well-presented live shrimp.

For the bold and courageous that want to spend all day casting until nearly an arm falls off, snook are an option in the backcountry, but slight changes in weather and water conditions can have huge impacts on their feeding activities. During the coldest snaps of the year, they will seek out the warmest pockets of water and huddle atop dark bottoms that absorb heat from the sun.

Snook fishing in February can be slim pickings or a total slay. It’s all about hunting around until you find those pockets of warmth and comfort. Winter linesiders are best targeted on small Rapala X-Raps or jighead and paddletail combinations. Soft plastics from Wyze Guys Tackle and Z-Man are excellent for backwater snook.

Spotted seatrout are consistently found on the flooded grass bars and when the tide drops they move out to even deeper areas adjacent to the grass. In the 10,000 Islands, it's not always that obvious to everyone where the good grass is, but basically anywhere from right off the outside island points, from Goodland to Flamingo, as far out as 20 feet deep, there can be some really nice patches of life. And if there is bait and grass, there are bound to be some trout lingering about. In the shallows, a popping cork with a scented plastic suspended below is always a surefire way to bend the rod.

A chartreuse Strike King Redfish Magic 1/8-ounce jighead with a 3-inch Gulp! shrimp in molting color is a lethal combination for trout out front. If you're fishing bars in the backcountry, then I recommend the same, but with a new penny colored shrimp. If you're fishing deeper water, say down 15 to 20 feet, you can use bucktails all the way up to ¾ and even 1-ounce depending on the current. I really like a yellow or chartreuse jighead with some flashabou for a little extra attention. Tip the jig with a shrimp, or even small whitebait. If you manage to net some small threadfin or pilchard, they can be great for tipping jigheads. Small strips of cut ladyfish also work well for tipping jigs. Bouncing the jig and allowing it to fall long enough can be the trick to the trout treat.

WINTER THRILLS

CHOKOLOSKEE @captrayculver

Cold day, hot fishing for Capt. Ray Culver. "We hit a couple of different areas to see where the fish might be holding up with the huge temperature drop. We were working a flat and found a large amount of snook holding up trying to stay warm. Then we picked off a few reds working the flat with knocker-rigged live shrimp."

HUNTING While most of the desirable hunts are out of season, there are still some great opportunities to enjoy the outdoors in Zone A. Bobcats and otters may be taken by rifle, shotgun, pistol, muzzleloader, air gun, crossbow or bow. Snipe are open to harvest until February 15. The second youth waterfowl hunting day is February 11, which is the second Saturday after the regular duck season closes.

Sea Cure Anchors
- 3 models
- 3-6-12 pounds
- Stainless & Bronze Construction
- 18 lb. NowAvailable

Visit our website at
www.seacureanchors.com

The Original E~SEARIDER
Marine Bean Bags
100% Marine Grade Materials • Limited Life-time Warranty
Neck Sore ?
Back Pain ?
Feet Ache ?
"Visit Our Interactive WebSite & Design Your Custom Bag Today!"
16 Colors • 4 Styles • 3 Sizes
1.888.335.3732
Relax...Sit Back & Enjoy!
www.marinebeanbags.com

Go Far, Go Fast, Go Anywhere
Inflatable Sea Eagle FishSkiff™ 16

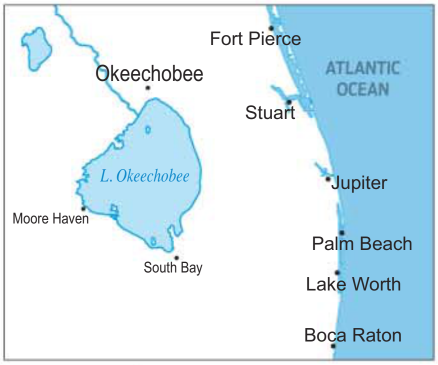
The super sleek, super stable inflatable *FishSkiff™ 16* is now 20 pounds lighter! Still as tough, still as stable, but easier to fold and lighter to carry due to the new ultra-light, ultra-strong construction that bonds two layers of reinforced PVC together. Plenty of room for up to 3 anglers and all their gear. Traverse 30 miles on a 3 gallon tank of gas and hit over 21 mph with just a 10hp motor! You'll catch fish all day with just 1 tank of gas. Add a bow mounted trolling motor for even more range and maneuverability.

16' Boat Rolls up and fits in a bag!

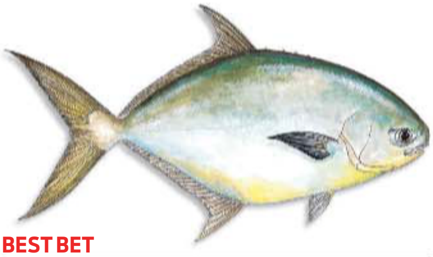
* 16' long x 54" wide
* Weighs just 82 lbs. (hull only)
* Weighs 92 lbs. with transom
* Holds up to 3 people or 1765 lbs of people & gear
* Inflates & sets up in 17 minutes
* 10 hp Capacity
* Motors up to 21.5 mph
* Packs to just 60" x 24" x 12"

Patent Pending
SEA EAGLE.com
1-800-944-7496 for a FREE catalog SeaEagle.com for more info
Dept FD023B, 19 N. Columbia St., Ste 1, Port Jefferson, NY 11777

ACTION SPOTTER



BY BRENTON ROBERTS
brenton.roberts@outdoorsg.com



BEST BET

Keep an eye on your boat wake when running from spot to spot. Chances are you will skip a **pompano** or two in the ICW or IRL. If you come across a flurry of them, swing upwind, shut down and make a drift while casting $^{3}/_{8}$-ounce Goofy jigs. Instances like these have turned a day of redfishing into a day of pompano fishing really quickly. One of my best days for pompano happened like this when a buddy and I caught our two-man limit in 30 minutes. The minimum fork length is 11 inches, and the daily bag limit is six fish per person.

> **February is my favorite month to target** crappie throughout our region because the cold weather can keep the bite going all day long.

From Stuart north, trolling dead ballyhoo is a much more effective way to sailfish than drifting with live baits.

Skipping Pompano, Sailfish and Limits of Crappie

The north end of the region, from Fort Pierce to Vero Beach, lights up this time of year with some great fishing for redfish and seatrout. Cold sunrises and big trout on topwater go together like peanut butter and jelly. Work the up-tide points and flats of spoil islands for the best success. I like a topwater with a large profile that produces a single knock. It seems to help the trout find the lure a little easier. Once the sun is up, transition over to a soft plastic or bucktail jig and work the adjacent holes and troughs found around these island and channels. If it's really cold, then be sure to slow that presentation down—cold water will slow the metabolism of these fish

Pompano, whiting, and croaker will be scouring the rocky coastline of Hutchinson Island during the coming months.

and have them hanging toward the bottom of the water column.

Weather will be the dictating factor when it comes to offshore fishing in February. It can be downright dangerous to go out on the roughest days this month. But find the right weather window and sailfish action should be consistent. Focus on trolling near current rips, temperature breaks, and flying fish for the best action. There's also a good chance of running into a swarm of dolphin or flurry of kingfish bites. Watch that sonar because a pack of hungry wahoo could be lurking around the thermocline. Running a diving plug or split tail mullet on some wire is not a bad idea this time of year.

February is my favorite month to target crappie throughout our region because the cold weather can keep the bite going all day long. Depth, vegetation, and water temperature are the three pieces to the crappie puzzle. Take note of all three when actively catching fish, because they will tend to follow the same pattern on that given day. Start on the outside grass lines around areas such as Indian Prairie on the north side of Lake Okeechobee and fish your way in until you find them. Clear water calls for natural-colored jigs. Brighten things up to chartreuse or pink if the water gets silty. It's never a bad idea to have a popping frog or a jig to cast around these same areas. Largemouth bass are in their post-spawn routine and are looking to chew.

February is just a great time to be outside in Florida. On those blustery days when you can't make it offshore, or maybe you're just looking to enjoy the outdoors with the family, take advantage of the great parks our region has to offer.

Jack Island Preserve State Park is located in Fort Pierce and has some gorgeous trails through the mangrove forest on the east side of the Indian River Lagoon. Being on the lagoon, opportunities for inshore species such as snook and redfish are aplenty.

Halpatiokee Regional Park in Stuart has your standard ball fields and playgrounds but slip off the asphalt and you'll find a labyrinth of some of Florida's best mountain biking and hiking trails. Because it is nestled along the headwaters of the South Fork of the St. Lucie River, both snook and bass can be caught on foot here. The trails also encompass a large lake that offers some great bass and panfish action, as well.

Grassy Waters Preserve in West Palm Beach is a 23-square-mile wetland with six different trails that highlight a variety of native habitats. Hiking, biking, and even paddling are a few things you can do at Grassy Waters. Fishing is permitted on the pier overlooking Gator Lake, located off the Eagle Loop. Don't leave your binoculars at home; some incredible birding can be seen here.

HUNTING Just about all hunting seasons have come to an end in our region. If you are looking to scratch that itch one last time, snipe season is open until February 15. It's time to start thinking about cool spring mornings and gobbles echoing throughout the Florida scrub. Youth turkey weekend south of State Road 70 is February 25-26. Youth weekend north of 70, as well as regular seasons, begins in March.

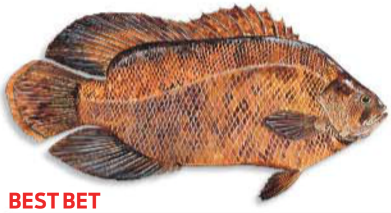
A FAMILY AFFAIR

STUART @chaos_fishing_adventures

This big momma snook was landed in the St. Lucie River, close to Sandsprit Park. *Florida Sportsman* Podcaster, Capt. Jonathan Earhart of Chaos Fishing Charters got Julie Martin (@julieeasthammartin) on the bite of a lifetime. This big snook ate a live mullet and measured out to be a massive 43 inches. L to R: Payton, Julie, and Taylor Martin

Venice
North Port
Punta Gorda
GULF OF MEXICO
Fort Myers
Sanibel
Estero

BY GREG STAMPER
snookstampcharters.com
(239) 313-1764



BEST BET

It is **tripletail** time! Running trap lines looking for fish floating behind the buoys is fun and easy. You can throw live shrimp on a 2/0 circle hook and more often than not they'll inhale it. Other options are ¼-ounce jigs thrown down the side of bridge pilings or channel markers. You can use artificial lures as well and these fish are also a blast on a flyrod.

Good Time for Snapper, Sheepshead, Tripletail, and Mackerel

Mackerel fishing with monofilament might clear out some space in your tackle box, but you'll find far better action than fishing with a wire leader.

February means that we are coming to the end of our winter season in Southwest Florida. But before we can transition into spring we'll have to work through a few more cold fronts. If you have a flexible schedule, then prefrontal fishing is always preferred. Those that can only go when time allows will certainly find themselves fishing under bluebird skies. Chamber of commerce days are beautiful just not great for fishing. These clear conditions usually last a day or two after a cold front has passed and bring along high pressure. Now add a drop in water temperature and the bite will surely shut down.

If the water temperature drops only a few degrees over a two-day period that's not a big deal. But when the water temperature drops say 5 degrees or more in that same period, then it is going to be tough fishing. Pay close attention to the water temperature reading on your MFD. When moving around from spot to spot see if the water temperature is warming up or cooling down. Some areas that have dark bottoms and are shallow will often warm up quicker and hold heat longer. Mud flats, oyster bars, and other dark inshore areas retain heat throughout the day and are favored haunts for patrolling redfish, snook, and trout. If you find water in a bay or creek that is one or two degrees warmer than elsewhere, I'd definitely start fishing there.

Snowbirds find it hard to believe that we think 53-degree mornings are cold, but if I must wear shoes and socks then it's too cold for my liking. Remember that our fish think similarly, and they do not enjoy the wintry weather. If we are lucky, the strongest cold fronts will stall out around the Tampa area, keeping our waters from cooling off and getting mucked up by the wind.

> "Mud flats, oyster bars and **other dark inshore areas retain heat throughout the day** and are favored haunts for patrolling redfish, snook, and trout.

If approaching a dock light from a boat, stay as far away as you can and aim your first cast for the outer perimeter of the glowing orb.

When the water temperature is below 70 degrees, slowing down your presentation is important. Popping corks are a great option as you simply flick the wrist to make some noise, and the bait basically stays where it is. Fish will be lethargic when the water is cold and aren't much for chasing things. Nearby predators, greedy and not wanting to miss out on an easy meal, are attracted to the sound of this surface activity. The latest popping cork designs incorporate some sort of clacker or rattler and are fashioned with a highly visible float that has a length of wire passing through the center.

Another good way of fishing in the cold will be to simply soak cut bait around the shorelines using mullet, ladyfish, or even crabs and just wait. I call that "spreads for reds" but snook, trout, and other fish will pick these baits up as well.

Nearshore fishing this time of the year is mainly snapper, sheepshead, and mackerel. Most of the wrecks and reefs within 9 miles will hold good numbers of these fish. Simple jigs with either shrimp or whitebait will get plenty of attention. If it's sheepshead you are after, try sandfleas, cut crab, tubeworms, or shrimp-tipped jigs. Once you locate a rockpile, if you don't catch a convict on the first few drops, then move on. Anglers running around from place to place may find tripletail hanging out on the crab buoys. Pay attention when running around in open water as there is a chance of finding a school of black drum. Typically, these big schools will throw out a mud slick in 20 to 30 feet of water making them relatively easy to locate.

The end of the month begins the transition of winter fish moving north, as well as the resurgence of some summer quarry. As we begin seeing fewer cold fronts affecting our water temperatures, the warming trends begin. At first, it's nothing considerable, but we know it's coming, and it's a welcomed change. Bring on spring!

HUNTING Quail and squirrel season runs statewide through the end of February but ends shortly after. Rabbits and wild hogs will fill up most of the hunts moving forward. You have a few days left on the youth waterfowl hunting days, so check your local regulations. By the end of the month, it will be serious turkey scouting. Visit www.myfwc.com to review the full regulations for upcoming hunts.

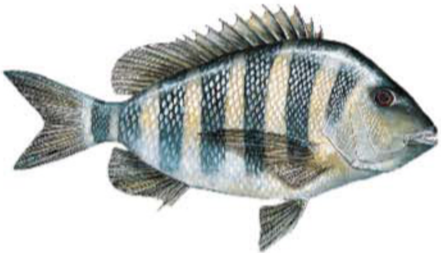
DRUM SOLO

ESTERO BAY @marniandshea

Harness the power of a black drum, no need for a paddle. Marni Roberts caught this big ugly in Estero Bay with a purple paddletail. "I caught it on my lightest setup, took a good 30 to 40 minutes to land. In a kayak, too! Drummed as we landed him. We released it safely back into the bay."

Tarpon Springs
Clearwater
Tampa
Saint Petersburg
GULF OF MEXICO
Anna Maria
Bradenton
Sarasota

BY RAY MARKHAM
captainraymarkham.com
(941) 228-3474



BEST BET

With weather conditions changing steadily, finding a consistent bite could be hard to come by. Fish can become finicky and feed sporadically depending on wind, temperature, and water clarity. Fronts can muddy up bays for days. Super low tides coupled with north winds make for tough fishing conditions for most species. But other opportunities exist to take some tasty fillets home for dinner.

Seawalls, piers, docks, rock jetties, and rockpiles will hold **sheepshead** this time of year. Negative low tides might dictate donning some neoprene waders if water temperatures are very cold. Deep channels and potholes might only be accessible by walking out on a dry flat. But if fishable water is available on land, docks, piers, or seawalls, take it. Barnacles that are exposed on rocks, pilings, or other structures not attached to private property can produce some excellent chum and baits that are attractive to sheepshead. There's not much better chum than a handful of barnacles trickled down next to a piling to lure fat sheepies to a hook. Thread a few on a hook and hang on!

While heading home from cobia fishing, Darius Kirschner of Sarasota spotted this tripletail hanging below a crab trap buoy. A live shrimp proved irresistible.

Water Temperature is Key to Finding the Fish

Ask just about any old timer what it was like fishing during February in West Central Florida back in the 1950s and '60s and you'll probably hear about freezes, frost, and harsh winter winds. Many changes have come about over the past years, but few are more obvious than those changes in weather patterns when you look at a calendar and step outside.

Twenty-five years ago, I would rarely get on the water before about 10 a.m. in February, with cold fronts blowing through about every five days or so. Temperatures in the 30s were not unheard of, but highs in the low 70s were felt at times. Where I would fish and what time I planned to be on the water would depend on wind direction and velocity, and air and water temperature.

There has always been discussion of where fish should be based on the time of the year, and an age-old argument continues for those who say some fish migrate based on water temperature and others say it's the length of the day that triggers this movement.

For years I would argue that during both summer and winter one of the most important instruments on my boat has been a water temperature gauge. I don't think fish have changed their comfort levels of water temperature, but the temperatures may be changing as we look at the calendar.

March and April used to be when I would expect to see an influx of Spanish and king mackerel here, but for the past decade or so even the month of February can be productive, particularly for Spanish. I'll start looking for bait moving from nearshore to inshore waters, as that is the big attractant for these species. Similarly, snook will be migrating from backcountry waters, creeks, and rivers out onto open flats. I rarely booked tarpon trips before the end of April but used to see a few even in March. Last spring I was seeing resident tarpon coming out of the

February, and in March even more showed up. By May it was game on. It wasn't a great season for me, and I've had much better, but over the past four years or so, except for much of last year, red tide reared its head moving bait schools out of the area or killing a portion of the schools and leaving a much smaller quantity for surviving predators to feed on.

Captain William Toney eyes a treed squirrel while on a hunt in Gulf Hammock WMA.

The task at hand this year might be to find clean water and habitat that is suitable for this region. Our offshore fishery might be the most stable due to its depth. Water temperatures don't fluctuate as rapidly in 150 feet of water and therefore changes are much slower to occur, so the fishing is more consistent. For anglers with the boat and ability to get out to the Middle Grounds, you can expect some great action with a variety of snapper species, amberjack (catch-and-release only for now), the possibility of kingfish, and more. Find an offshore spring and the action can be even better. Head boats and go-fast boats run charters to these sacred fishing grounds, with weather windows usually offering one or two fishable days each week. Time it right and you will bring home plenty of table fare.

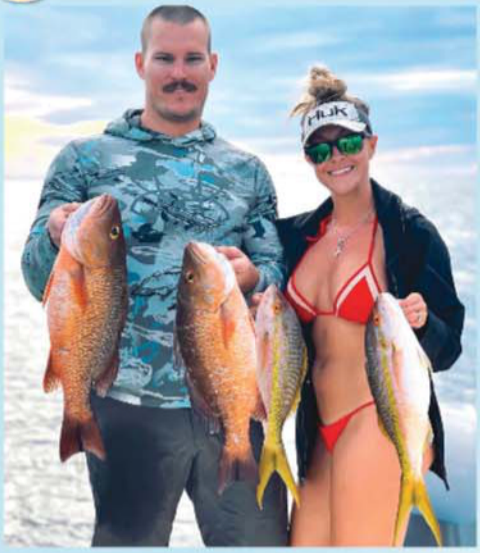
I love fishing inshore waters using artificial lures, and this is possibly the most productive time to use them. If live bait is your thing, look for pinfish, grunts, and whitebait or threadfin around bridges and piers, but it might be tough to get. Your best bet this time of year is live shrimp fished under popping corks or freelined. As for our estuarine waters, shrimp will be the prey the fish will key in on most simply because of their availability. Schools of finfish might be more available off the beaches.

Speckled trout have slowly been making a comeback from bouts of red tide along the coast from mid-Pinellas County south. Last year red tide blooms weren't too bad much of the time, and most anglers in the area were catching fair numbers of undersized trout. These fish grow relatively quickly, and we will likely see a much better winter/spring trout bite this year. Deep potholes and channels just off the flats are likely the most productive areas to investigate but don't overlook areas of hard bottom just off the beaches from Anna Maria to Sand Key. Ranging from 10 to 20 foot depths, these areas have historically held some of the largest spotted seatrout and silver trout in February. Jigs, perhaps tipped with a bit of fresh shrimp, will get the most attention. While working off the beaches check stone crab trap floats for tripletail that may laze around near the surface. Live shrimp will produce the best here as well.

The shallows around mangrove-lined shorelines exposed to direct sunlight hold some large trout there to warm up. Areas adjacent to dark mud flats are even more productive as the sun heats the water throughout the day. Presentations need to be slow, especially when working the bottom with bucktails and soft plastic combinations or artificial shrimp. Slow-sinking and suspending lures make some of the best "in your face" presentations for inshore fish. Snook, trout, and redfish all respond to these lures that can hang in the strike zone longer than lures that move constantly. While I love fishing topwater lures, I pick my days to break them out. They can be most productive following several days of continuous sunshine and warm temperatures, but just prior to the next front as cloudy skies arrive with some wind.

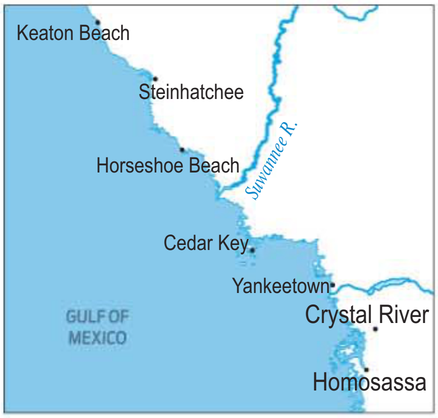
HUNTING I love this time of year for getting out in the woods and setting up camp. For me, the next couple of months whispers squirrel hunting before the season ends March 5. Productive times exist on warmer mornings when the air is still and the trees are quiet. It's the best time to hear the movement of squirrels chattering and hopping from limb to limb. My single shot .410 has been my longtime favorite to carry. It's lightweight and easily gets the job done. But when I'm feeling like a sharpshooter, my 10/22 Ruger .22 carbine is tough to beat. I must admit, a scope makes the job much easier and my flat-shooting .17 caliber Savage really dials them in. There is a daily bag limit of 12 gray squirrels per hunter. Visit www.myfwc.com before your next hunt.

VALENTINE'S SNAPPER

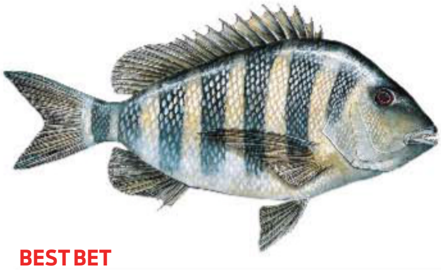


SARASOTA @fishin_fit

Last year in February, Matt and Ciara Gaydos of St. Petersburg, reported a great snapper bite. "We went approximately 30 miles out of Sarasota on Saturday before this nasty front came through and caught these monster snapper! The yellowtail I'm holding are 21 and 23 inches," said Ciara.



BY JOE RICHARD
joe@seafavorites.com



BEST BET

February is **sheepshead** month along the Big Bend region. Why? They gather to spawn at offshore structures in 20 to 30 foot depths. You want calm weather and live shrimp as insurance policies for having a productive day. Last time I tried it the weather was warm with thick sea fog lasting until noon before burning away. Around us, I could hear many voices from other boaters, but all were invisible until the fog vanished and the fleet appeared. We were at the artificial reef off Keaton Beach, where concrete culverts were scattered many years ago in 17 feet of water. The water was clear enough to spot these dark shapes, and that's where we cast. Hookups were steady. One-ounce egg sinkers or jigheads with live or fresh shrimp—that was the ticket. Florida, after waiting too many years, finally cut its sheepshead bag limit from 15 down to 8. The minimum size limit is 12 inches total length and there is no closed season.

Cold-tolerant sheepshead are fun to catch and excellent table fare. Fortunately, the Big Bend has plenty of ideal habitats.

Winter Strategies for Specks and Sheepshead

Catching trout this month on grassflats off the coast can draw a big fat blank; I've been out there on warm, perfect days in winter and seen little signs of life. I mean like nothing, as singer Ray Charles would say. Nary a boat in sight. Trout have either moved offshore and disappeared, moved to places unknown to man, or they're hiding in the creeks. Next month, maybe?

Fortunately, February is prime spawning season in North Florida's freshwater lakes, and fishing there can be a pleasant respite from fishing the Gulf. Which is still cold, with low tides and often coastal fog even on bluebird days back on land. Compare that with fishing barefoot in calm afternoon waters on the upwind side of a lake.

In Florida, black crappie are more commonly known as speckled perch and regularly take tube jigs fished vertically.

February is when crappie (locally known as specks) move into lake shallows, and it's much more enjoyable prying them out of flooded trees or shoreline vegetation compared with the rest of the year when these same fish are caught while trolling in open, deeper water. Some anglers still use minnows this month, but I was taught a dozen years ago that casting jigs under corks is the way to go; it covers lots of ground. How? By making long casts on the outside of vegetation. Sometimes just a single stick 40 yards from land, marking underwater structure, is all you need for a limit of fish. Toss out that cork and work it back slowly like a topwater.

I use a small, round orange bobber, something easily seen at 25 yards. You don't want to strain your eyes searching for that bobber. This is typical hand-to-eye coordination. When the bobber disappears, lift the rod tip and reel. I bring a variety of jigs, usually something with white or green. Set the jig 30 inches under the cork. A spread of three corks can even be towed gently behind the boat with an electric motor, past floating bonnets or just out from shorelines.

A 4-foot ultra-light rod works great in this open water and you get the most fight from every fish. On the other hand, a fairly stiff 8-foot rod will sling that jig and bobber a fair ways, and the long rod is great for steering fighting fish away from nearby cover, which they often head for if given a chance. When casting 20 yards right along the very edge of floating cover, you want that long rod. It can also be used to fish inside vegetation, like a cane pole.

During high water years, one can ease back into flooded cypress forest and that is where the short rod is best, to avoid overhead limbs. In tight quarters, the short rod can be bent back like a bow and arrow, making accurate casts. Thump the jig and cork off a big cypress tree and see if a half dozen crappie aren't waiting underneath. Some people even get out of their boats, wading to out-of-reach spots. Seems like the alligators would get them, but I've heard no tales of close encounters. Other hazards include snakes and overhead wasp nests. Veteran fishermen have told me they won't venture inside flooded woods for love or money.

I generally release the smaller fish, also the big ones full of roe, since they're getting ready to spawn. Chunky 10-inchers are kept for friends and fish fries. Crappie taste better from some lakes than others. Fish from fairly shallow, marshy lakes with mud bottom don't taste as good.

There are many lakes in north Florida, and it's the bigger ones that see more traffic from "speck" fishermen. Orange and neighboring Lochloosa lakes are quite large and the latter is host to out-of-state RV campers who fish for weeks at a time. Rodman Reservoir offers up many fat, one-pound fish that are dark green and colorful. (Often schooling under floating vegetation, where anglers use garden rakes to open a hole and drop down minnows). There is also Newnan's Lake, fairly shallow but offering great action, though cyclical with good and bad years.

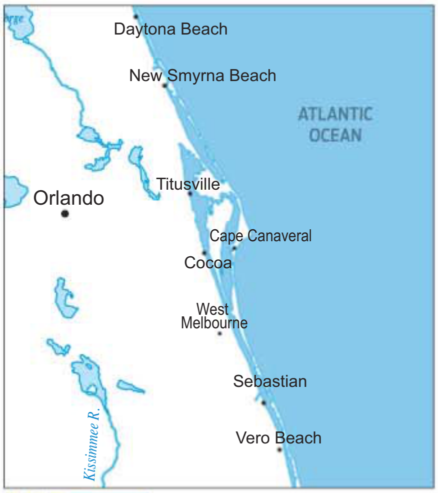
HUNTING The next few weeks will be quiet, but there are opportunities to bag a wild hog. In most wildlife management areas (WMAs), wild hog hunting is allowed during most seasons, except spring turkey season. A hunting license is not needed for hog, but a management area permit is usually required, and a quota or daily quota permit may be required. Area-specific regulations can be found at www.myfwc.com/wmabrochures.

NEWFOUND WATERS

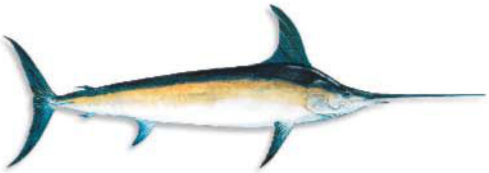
YANKEETOWN @mike_dean1

Have Google Earth, will travel. Exactly what Mike Dean did. "I've never been to Yankeetown before but saw how crazy it looked on Google Earth, so I went. It was low tide when we put in so had to go offshore out of the canal. We stopped at these spoil islands about 3 miles offshore and caught him and a few more on a Johnson spoon."

ACTION SPOTTER



BY MATT BADOLATO
mbadolato2010@my.fit.edu



BEST BET

Swordfishing in recent years has been good in February for those crews making the 50-mile run to the Melbourne Canyons to drift baits. Examining a bathymetric chart of this area reveals a swath of pinnacles and canyons beneath the Gulf Stream—prime sword habitat. When the weather allows, drifting strip baits, squid, Spanish mackerel and ladyfish over this area can produce exhilarating results. The minimum size limit is 47 inches measured from the tip of the lower jaw to the fork of the tail, with a daily bag limit of one per person, not to exceed four per recreational vessel. An Atlantic HMS permit is required to harvest swordfish.

> “The unique geography **around Port Canaveral makes it** an ideal tripletail haunt.

Six-year-old Cannon caught his first flounder while fishing with his father Lewis Arnold and his mom Cherlyn.

Winter Fishing is a Winning Proposition

Sherpas, convicts, sheepers—whatever you call them—February is the month to target sheepshead on the Space Coast. Each winter, these tasty fish congregate in large schools to spawn on nearshore structure in the Atlantic. Every inlet, jetty, shallow reef, and nearshore wreck will hold these fish throughout February and into March as temperatures remain cool.

They are an everyman’s fish and can be targeted from piers, beaches, or boats. Jetty anglers can find them at Ponce Inlet, Port Canaveral’s Jetty Park, and Sebastian Inlet State Park. Surfcasters should focus on beaches with extensive outcroppings of coquina and worm rock, like those in the Satellite Beach stretch of shoreline. Boaters have the option of venturing to nearshore wrecks, inside of inlets, or shallow structures such as the natural reefline extending south between Sebastian Inlet and Ft. Pierce.

The challenge in sheepshead fishing lies not so much in finding them, but in getting them to bite and stick to a hook. They’re not dumb, so properly presented baits with well-disguised hooks are essential. Top rig choices, whether from shore or boat, are a sliding sinker rig and a one- or two-hook rig. The dropper rig should consist of a small bank sinker with one or two dropper loop knots tied above the weight. Small, sharp #1 or #2 hooks should be looped on. The advantage of this rig is it allows the angler to feel the slightest bite as the weight keeps tension on the rig.

A handpick shrimp sealed the deal for Dylan Anderson, who found a floating log off Sebastian that was loaded with tripletail.

And the rounded edges of a bank sinker help keep it from snagging the rocky bottom of a sheepshead's preferred habitat.

Sandfleas, a preferred sheep bait, are still essentially non-existent along the Space Coast after disappearing over a year ago for unknown environmental reasons. Regardless, small live shrimp, fresh pieces of shrimp, fiddler crabs, and knuckles from blue crabs all work just as well. Chumming with leftover scraps of shrimp or crab will often get a school fired up to take hooked baits more readily.

Look for clear water for the best catches of sheepshead. They're sight feeders, and we tend to get the clearest water during the calm days following cold fronts. North winds bring cooler, cleaner water to the surf zone south of Canaveral, so any beaches or structures in this area benefit from a good breeze.

A sliding sinker, or fish finder rig, is great for fooling the largest sheeps, which will more confidently swim off to swallow a tensionless bait. Again, small hooks are key to getting the point to stick within a mouth full of teeth. Whichever rig you choose, keep leaders light to fool their eyes—20-pound-test is perfect. In state waters (out to 3 miles from shore), sheepshead must be 12 inches total length and the limit is a generous 8 per person—more than enough for fish tacos.

Another tricky fish that east coast anglers fuss about in February is the tripletail. As southward currents and northerly winds move debris and these flotsam-loving fish down the south Atlantic coast, anglers patiently wait for calm, sunny days to venture just offshore to find them. Like sunning alligators, tripletail will move up in the water column to warm themselves and feed around buoys, lines of sargassum, and color changes, usually within a few miles of land.

Tripletail are voracious opportunistic feeders, willing to pounce on a live shrimp, finger mullet, or other small baitfish without a second thought—finding them is the difficult part. The unique geography around Port Canaveral makes it an ideal tripletail haunt. Cape Canaveral, a spit of land and shoals jutting out into the Atlantic from Florida's relatively straight coastline, creates a somewhat protected cove of water to its south known as the Canaveral Bight. Acoustic telemetry data from radio-tagged tripletail shows these fish making long stops here after venturing from as far as South Carolina. Biologists have found that other fish—red drum, sharks, and others—have an affinity for these waters and use the Canaveral Bight as a preferred spawning area.

On warm days when seas permit, look for tripletail around the line of navigation buoys east of Port Canaveral. Pitch live shrimp on a 3/0 to 5/0 hook and 30- or 40-pound-test fluorocarbon leader. If fish aren't at the surface, then let baits slowly sink, adding a small splitshot above the bait. A live finger mullet or small croaker lip-hooked on a jighead helps with a deeper presentation.

Tripletail may stage at any depth on the buoy's chain. When you feel their powerful bite, let them take the bait a little longer than you think you should—they'll swim off and swallow it, resulting in better hookups inside their rock-hard mouths.

If water levels on the St. Johns River have come down, look for catfish gathered in deep holes around bends in the river. The more productive portion of the river for soaking small live baits, cut fish, worms, or even peeled shrimp seems to be north of State Road 528.

HUNTING With deer season ending in January and turkey season starting on March 18, hunters can fill the lull by chasing public land hogs during the designated small game seasons in specific Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). Most public lands don't allow the use of high-powered, centerfire rifles during the small game seasons, but that's fine—there's a certain charm to sneaking through swamps and palmettos for the chance at a close-range shotgun shot at some wild pork. Be extra quiet while walking and listening and play the wind carefully since these hogs have been pursued since September. Some WMAs that offer non-quota hog hunts during February are Herky Huffman/Bull Creek, Three Lakes, Upper St. Johns River Basin, and Salt Lake. Other WMAs offer hog hunts this month with a quota permit available via lottery from the FWC.

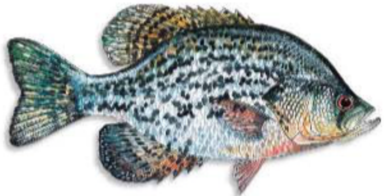
GATOR HUNT

PALM SHORES @iwanover

The Indian River Lagoon is home to the current IGFA all-tackle world record spotted seatrout. Many giant trout have been produced through this system but in recent years loss of seagrass has made it harder on the species. Iwan Thomas, Orlando, landed this true gator using a white D.O.A. swimbait. "I didn't get a weight, I didn't wanna hold it straight up and down, released safely! Fish of a lifetime!" said Iwan.

St. Marys R.
Fernandina Beach
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Jacksonville
Saint Augustine
St. Johns R.
Gainesville
Flagler Beach

BY RICK RYALS
rick.ryals@outdoorsg.com



BEST BET

It's time to break out the spider rigs and head to the middle of lakes like Crescent and Santa Fe to rack up big numbers of **speckled perch**. Tiny speck jigs with minnows set at different depths around the boat will produce big numbers. Take a look at a speck, and you'll see their eyes point almost straight up. Keeping the baits staggered at depths shallower than where you mark them on your scope will fill your 25 fish per person limit once you find a school. There's just nothing better on a cold and windy Sunday afternoon than a belly full of fried speck.

> “**A flyrod is the most effective weapon**, as the splash of a ¼-ounce jig is more than most redfish will stand for.

Southern Salt Fishing Charters will be on the sheepshead this month. See you at the jetties.

Bring on the Last of the Cold

Why oh why do we have the month of February? My first love is blue water trolling, and if we get four calm days 68 miles offshore Jacksonville during the dastardly month of February, then we'll consider ourselves lucky. For more sane offshore fishermen, who can make themselves happy within 20 miles of shore, fishing is much more tolerable. If, and that's a big if, we have a better sea bass season, it will be at its best in February. Red snapper, as we all know, are out of control.

In case that wasn't bad enough, like just about everywhere else in Florida, sharks are horrible here, too. Big bull and sandbar sharks are taking fish just about everywhere you try to catch vermilions and sea bass. Jigging with a 3- to 4-ounce jig with a scented tail like Gulp! or Fishbites seems to discourage the red snapper a little while enticing the biggest sea bass around.

If vermilions and triggerfish are more appealing to you, then it's time to start hunting from 126 feet out. Trolling motors with spot lock, and more boats with CMOR Mapping, have greatly increased the pressure on our 21-fathom area. If the SAFMC had the vision to open red snapper, then the boats could make up a good catch closer to shore, and the pressure would be spread out more evenly over the entire area.

High-speed trolling has taken over the wahoo fishery. February is generally about as cold as our water gets. That means the wahoo junkies are looking for the first temperature break over 68 degrees around structure. Many people mistakenly believe high-speed trolling is all about driving around the wide-open ocean at 18 knots. The truth is that structure is just as important to wahoo fishermen as it is to bottom fishermen. Wahoo are going to be where the structure is, preying on bonito, blue runner, small kings, and even vermilion snapper. Savvy wahoo fishermen have a plan and will constantly move from spot to spot. The good ones realize, “You have to fish somewhere all the time.” Captain Robert Johnson told me that in my 30s. Unfortunately, it took me decades to realize what he meant. The colder the inshore water gets, the more it will concentrate wahoo near the 28-fathom ledge.

For us natural bait fishermen, the rare calm day that we see in February should have excellent action at the 28-fathom ledge. Blackfin tuna should be visible on the surface, as well as on

Cold mornings lead adventurous anglers to reds schooled up and hungry in Jacksonville's backcountry creeks.

the bottom scope. If you see schools of bigger fish high up in the water column, it's usually either bonito or blackfin. One pass with small diving plugs and dink ballyhoo will let you know which species is present.

I'm really wondering how this stretch of warm winters has affected the sailfish migrations. We never really gave a thought to sails off our coast in February just a decade ago. Two winters ago, we racked up a dozen releases on a calm February day. Are they shifting their winter haunts north? We also consistently picked up mahi-mahi all winter at the ledge last year. No great numbers, but we didn't make a February trip without at least a couple in the box.

They say one man's trash is another man's treasure, and the colder water that invades our inshore fishery may mean an end to inshore flounder and sheepshead fishing, but it brings crystal clear water to our flats. If we have a high sun afternoon with a rising tide over our vast expanse of mudflats, then world-class sight fishing awaits. It's interesting to me how those wary flats reds have evolved. When the first few technical poling skiffs arrived in Northeast Florida, the reds were bunched up by the hundreds. If you hooked one, the school would blow up, and within 10 minutes they would all be right back where you first saw them.

Fast forward 20+ years and the reds are more commonly found in groups of 4 to 8 fish. And if you bang your pushpole against the platform they scatter like roaches. That actually makes fishing more challenging and even more fun for skilled anglers. A flyrod is the most effective weapon, as the splash of a ¼-ounce jig is more than most redfish will stand for.

It's also prime time to look for sheepshead at the jetties, and offshore. The big females should be on schedule to spawn late in the month on the building moon. Any wreck within 15 miles of the beach will hold at least a few spawners. This is also when you want to throw ⅛- to ¼-ounce jigheads pinned to a fiddler or small live shrimp into the jetties. I have come to prefer the ⅛-ounce variety as it seems a fiddler falling more naturally appeals to the sheepies.

Speaking of fishermen that view the coming weeks much differently than I do, February ranks right at the top of the calendar for trophy bass aficionados. A warm spell will send the biggest females of the year up into the shallows looking for a safe place to lay eggs. Clear water will make spotting beds easier, but cold fronts will drive the big fish out to deeper water. If spotting beds isn't your thing, trolling big wild shiners might tempt a double-digit bass. Florida's TrophyCatch program has recorded fish over 8 pounds in just about every major body of fresh water. Every year, more and more monster bass are caught and then released to grow some more. Has one made it over 20 pounds?

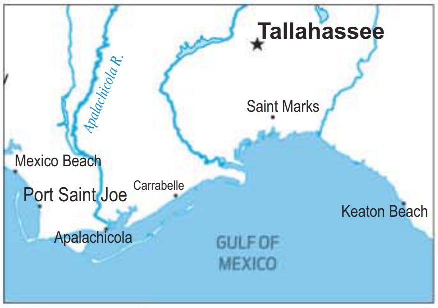
HUNTING Gray squirrels are about it in North Florida during February but don't get the idea that's a bad thing. My first hunting experience was squirrel hunting, and I still love it. A quiet cold morning with little wind will have squirrels running around every big oak tree you can find. This heritage was passed down by my father, whose father made a deal with him. Grandpa gave him a .22 rifle and five rounds of ammunition. For every squirrel my dad brought home, Grandpa would give him two more rounds. I don't know how true it was, but Dad swore at one time he was more than 50 rounds ahead of the game. What a great activity to introduce kids to the outdoors.

BRACKISH BUCKETMOUTH

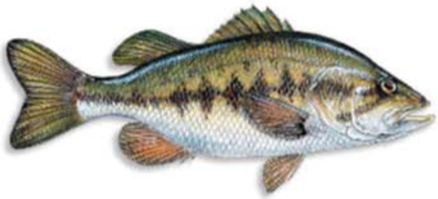
JULINGTON CREEK @marshallsadler_69

Marshall Sadler, 15, Jacksonville, with an 8.11-pound largemouth bass caught using a Shimano SLX DC and Stanley Jigs Top Toad in Julington Creek. "I was trolling the bank fishing the lily pads and the duckweed and it hit topwater. At first I thought it was a bowfin but once it got close I knew it was a bass. Monster river bass!"

NORTHWEST MEXICO BEACH TO KEATON BEACH



BY BILL GREER
wagreer@comcast.net



BEST BET

In Northwest Florida, there are numerous lakes where bed fishing for **largemouth bass** is suitable, and February is usually when the bedding begins. Water clarity is one if not the most important factor. In large reservoirs such as Lake Talquin and Seminole, the coves and shallow bays that are not affected by creeks with heavy sediment flow are good places to target bedding bass. On smaller lakes and ponds, shorelines with sparse vegetation or where there are openings in the plant growth are preferred.

> “A good strategy for smaller boats is to **stay within a short run of one of the passes or cuts in case** the weather takes a turn for the worse.

Mild offshore winds and clear skies attract anglers to the beach for a picture-perfect day of redfishing.

Reds in the Surf; White Bass in the Rivers

One of the nicest things about February is that you can experience some great fishing without much of a crowd. On calm days, when the wind blows offshore, the surf lays down along the beaches of our local barrier islands. This is a great time to pole or use a trolling motor to ease along just off the beach looking for redfish. If it’s calm enough, anchoring is also an option. The redfish along the beach might come in singles, packs of several fish, or even a whole school that turns the water a distinct coloration. In any case, they are the perfect targets for sight fishing.

Our surf reds will hit flyrod streamers and crab imitations as well as jigs, plugs, and spoons. They will also take small live baits but these can be hard to catch in the winter and awkward to cast. The key to catching these beach reds is seeing them before they see or feel your presence. Polarized glasses are essential and so is a stealthy approach. A little bit of wave action or ripple is helpful in breaking up the water pushed by the moving boat. Slow is better than fast when moving toward fish to reduce hull slap. Height is also a great advantage for seeing fish. Standing on a poling or casting platform, a sturdy seat or an ice chest can really make a difference in how far away you can spot fish.

Since there aren’t usually obstructions along the beach, light tackle that’s easy to cast accurately is much better than heavier gear and it is a lot more fun to fish with. Some of these wintertime redfish can be quite hefty, 30 pounds or more, so anglers can give chase with the boat if need be.

A good bit of Northwest Florida has access to this type of beach fishing. Starting to the west at St. Joseph and moving east along Cape San Blas, St.

Vincent Island, St. George Island, and Dog Island, there's 68 miles of beach to explore. This is mostly white sand and clear water that's well suited for sight fishing. A good strategy for smaller boats is to stay within a short run of one of the passes or cuts in case the weather takes a turn for the worse.

Fishing out of Aucilla, Terrie Huffmaster got her flounder jigging a Lil Slick Mad Mullet on a falling tide.

When the temperature reaches 68 degrees in the Ocklochonee River above Lake Talquin, the white bass migrate upriver to spawn. This often happens in late February or early March. These feisty cousins of the striped bass and the hybrid sunshine bass might be small in stature, but they are not lacking in either table fare or spirit.

White bass typically gather over sandbars in this meandering river to deposit their eggs. The sandbars are often in 4 to 8 feet of water in areas where the current builds up the sediment. Likely spawning sites occur on the down-current side of creeks that enter the river or where the current abruptly changes direction.

White bass fishing is a natural match for light tackle. These fish average just a few pounds and the current Florida record stands at 4.69 pounds. Effective baits for white bass are crawfish, grass shrimp, and small jigs and spinners. Crawfish are often seined from roadside ditches where water collects. Grass shrimp are also dipped or seined from the shallows on small ponds and lakes. They are usually rigged with a short leader and sliding weight that's just heavy enough to reach the bottom.

Depending on the river current, ⅛- to ¼-ounce jigs in red and white, solid white, and chartreuse are good choices when matched with light spinning or baitcasting tackle. A cane or bream buster pole can also be very effective for working jigs as well as crawfish and grass shrimp.

The white bass typically travel upriver in waves, so the fishing action can fluctuate during the day. The spawning activity can continue for several weeks but when the water temperature reaches 64 to 65 degrees the fish leave the river and return to the lake, where they can be harder to find and catch.

Most anglers like sight fishing because it combines aspects of both hunting and fishing. In freshwater, sight fishing for bedding bass is just like sight fishing on the flats, only the bass aren't moving. This doesn't necessarily make it easy. Most of the time bass on beds aren't interested in feeding. They are also in shallow water where they can easily see the angler. So, the task is to entice the bass to bite without spooking them from their bed.

Lake Jackson has long been a great place to fish beds, but the water level has been low for several years, which makes launching anything but small boats, canoes, and kayaks difficult. The shallows on Lake Jackson should still have some bedding activity that's fishable. Lakes Iamonia and Miccosukee can also offer good fishing. In Florida, research indicates that bed fishing has little effect on a lake's population, especially if the bass are released. It only takes a few successful spawning bass to populate a lake or pond.

HUNTING Antlered deer may be harvested in Zone D during the general gun season until February 19 and during muzzleloading season from February 20 to 26. Squirrel season is open statewide until March 5. Several Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) in Northwest Florida are also open for squirrel hunting. These include the Ochlockonee River and Joe Budd WMAs that are open on weekends for shotguns, muzzleloaders, and non-centerfire guns.

NORTHWEST KNOB HEAD

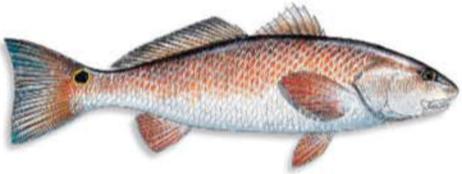
MEXICO BEACH @kcsportfishing

Florida Sportsman Northwest Florida website forecaster Capt. Kevin Lanier explains, "The early spring pattern is falling into place with flounder and sea bass fishing starting to get rolling." He advises, "Start looking for these along the shoreline or out on the sandy shoals. Live shrimp or live finger mullet are your best bet. If you can find structure it will improve your chances." One of Capt. Lanier's successful anglers, above, holds up a large sea bass.

PANHANDLE PENSACOLA TO PANAMA CITY BEACH

Pensacola
Niceville
Destin
Gulf Breeze
Fort Walton Beach
Panama City
Panama City Beach
GULF OF MEXICO

GABRIELLE BARNES
ladyluckadventures.com
(407) 818-3141



BEST BET

We are still in a winter pattern in the Panhandle, but spring is right around the corner and **redfish** are definitely your best bet in most transition months. You can find slots on the flats, bulls on the beach, and both mingling together on the jetties and bridges. Live shrimp will be in my livewell almost every trip in February, but if I am going to throw an artificial then I like a ¼-ounce jighead on a 3-inch paddletail or a ned rig Finesse TRD from Z-man. Long casts and slow retrieves work best in cold water.

Pier Tuna and Bull Reds on the Beach

Last year, anglers experienced a wide-open blackfin tuna bite from atop the Navarre Pier.

Although it is the best time of the year to harvest that big buck you've had your eyes on, there are also some stellar fishing opportunities across the Panhandle, weather permitting. In February, most of my fishing trips occur inshore or on nearshore wrecks, but if we get a weather window to shoot offshore, then it's a great time target yellowfin tuna and wahoo.

This will be the last month to get on a good flounder bite before they start to make their way back into the bay. Hop around your favorite nearshore wrecks within 4 miles from the beach; I prefer a live bull minnow, but small cigar minnows and shrimp will also tempt nearby flounder. Try a Carolina rig with a 15-inch, 20-pound leader and 2/0 kahle hook.

Sheepshead don't seem to care about cold and windy weather and will be my go-to target for the next two months. These fish will be hanging on the bridges, grazing the pilings for crabs, shrimp, and oysters, but if you arrive to find a slow bite check out any jetties or deep docks near the inlet. If you still aren't having any luck, pay attention to the tide. If it's slack tide the bite will shut down completely, but in an hour or two the fish will fire back up. Bull redfish and big black drum will also be cruising the bridges and jetties, so it's a good idea to bring a heavier rod and put a larger bait on the bottom, such as half a blue crab.

When you get tired of soaking baits or the tide switches up, take a ride to the beach to fish the giant schools of redfish the Emerald Coast has to offer. You could also rig up some soft plastics on jigheads and hit the creeks in search of trout and slot reds. Regardless of where you plan to fish this month, you will most likely be faced with north winds in some fashion. One way to deal with the wind is by fishing the beach. That north wind will completely flatten out the surf and provide the best sight fishing conditions for redfish and the occasional black drum.

I particularly love this type of fishing

> “Bull redfish and big black drum will also be cruising the bridges and jetties, **so it's a good idea to bring a heavier rod** and put a larger bait on the bottom.

because the lack of big baitfish on the beach makes these reds much more likely to eat a smaller offering, like a fly or soft plastic. If you prefer live bait, then shrimp will work just fine but you will need to add some weight to deliver a decent cast. When you spot a school, mindfully slow your boat knowing that changing throttle speeds too close will spook them. Position yourself far enough in front of the school so you can just barely see them, and then wait patiently while remaining ready to fire off a cast. Lead the school 6 to 10 feet and work your lure or shrimp right in front of them. The best retrieve is going to be at a 45-degree angle. This allows you to get the bait in front of the fish while still making it appear naturally swimming away from them.

If sight fishing isn't your thing, then head to the muddy creek mouths and bayous. Many redfish and trout will be schooled up in these areas looking for warmth over the dark bottom. Keep in mind that trout season is closed for the month of February in the Panhandle.

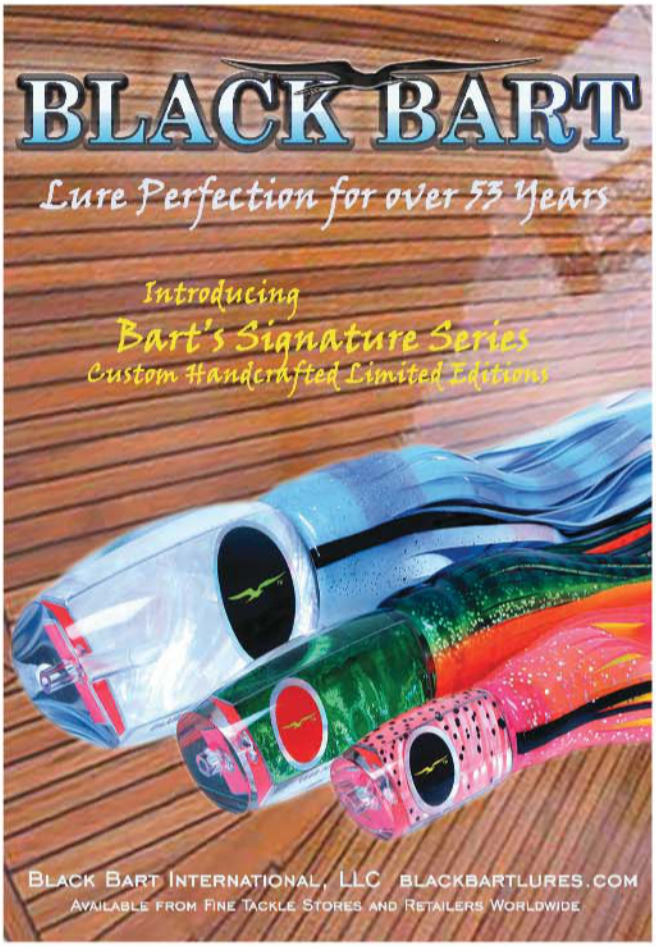
Last year we had epic fishing for blackfin tuna. There were multiple days when dozens of tuna were being caught on the local piers and also from kayaks and boats fishing close to shore. It was one of the best months I can recall and hopefully, history repeats itself. Yellowfin tuna and wahoo can be found on the Lump and floating rig structures much farther offshore; just pay close attention to the weather if you are planning a trip. Live bait can be difficult to come by this time of year so gear up to chunk for the tuna just in case. Wahoo will also be hanging around temperature breaks and changing bottom contour so always have some high-speed lures rigged up and ready to drop back.

HUNTING This is the month to finally get that big buck. Most of our region will be in the rut so get in the stand because the bucks will be on the move. The regular waterfowl season has just ended but February 11 is youth waterfowl hunting day, so if you have a youth 15 years old and younger, take advantage of getting them out there. You can find more information about regulations and seasons at www.myfwc.com.

BRIDGE BUSTERS

PENSACOLA @thafish_

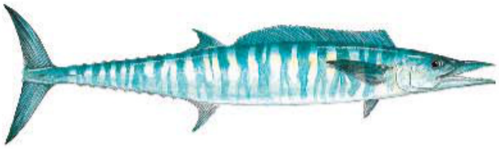
"Made it out for a few hours to find some nice convicts to bring home for dinner. The bite was fairly consistent but slow for this time of year. Similar to the last trip, we couldn't stay away from break-offs, either. Hoping we can land a few of the absolute bruisers that burned us up in the pilings on the next trip!"



BLACK BART
Lure Perfection for over 53 Years
Introducing
Bart's Signature Series
Custom Handcrafted Limited Editions
Black Bart International, LLC BLACKBARTLURES.COM
Available from Fine Tackle Stores and Retailers Worldwide

THE ONLY THING THAT'S GOING TO BREAK IS A WORLD RECORD
Ask for
Made in U.S.A.
USA
Our Brands Are Strength and Quality.
SAMPO SWIVELS
SAMPOSWIVELS.COM
ROSCO TERMINAL TACKLE
ROSCOTACKLE.COM
DONNMAR
DONNMARPLIERS.COM
1-800-SWIVELS
To find a retailer near you, please visit our websites

BY BRETT FITZGERALD
brett@angleraction.org



BEST BET

There is a reason we wait for the water temperature to drop before zipping over and fishing The Bahamas for **wahoo**. "In mid-November, my mate Dave Stanton went across and the water temp was 80.3 degrees. If it isn't below 78, then you'll get eaten up by 'cudas, and he did," says Capt. Richard Hunt. "Another buddy was high-speed trolling around them. Lost 8 lures, caught 15 barracuda and one wahoo." The formula for wahoo this month across the pond revolves around water temperature, tide, and lunar phase.

"For me, the water has to get down to about 76. If you find that temp along with a depth break—say 200 to 600 which is not that hard to find over there—you're on your way," says Hunt. "I like very low to slack outgoing tide, then the first bit of incoming tide. Just south of Walker's Cay, the bait runs through the cuts that move water during the tides. I like to turn my boat near those tidal washes and believe me, you can catch some big wahoo in 90 feet. I don't run along that depth, but on the turn I have picked up a 50-pound 'hoo."

Fishing out of West End, Capt. Hunt heads north toward Memory Rock and Matanilla searching out deepwater habitat for mystic grouper.

Tidal Wahoo and Bottom Fish Galore

A well-planned winter wahoo trip to The Bahamas can pay incredible dividends. But few talk about the other fisheries around West End during the winter. "For a family-oriented fishing day, you just can't beat yellowtail snapper," says Capt. Richard Hunt of the Fort Pierce-based Little Adam Fishing Charters. "Once the bite starts, you will catch, and catch a lot." Hunt says patience is key, along with gratuitous chumming. "Find structure in 40 to 60 feet and do your best to anchor up tide. If you are within 300 feet, and you chum with patience, the fish will find you." Not just yellowtail either. Mutton, mackerel, and various hinds are just some of the species you might hook into.

"You really should wait for them to ball up in the chum slick. If you are fishing for the big ones, two to five pounders, the wait is critical." Hunt says if you have the itch to fish sooner, then grab a larger rod and rig it with either a chunk of conch or ballyhoo and cast it way back to see if any mutton snapper or grouper are interested.

Hunt is crafty with his terminal tackle. "I will put about 30 feet of fluorocarbon on with a Bimini twist. That way, I am only retying hooks throughout the day, not the whole leader." He stays light for yellowtail, preferring 15-pound fluorocarbon and a very light spinning rig and uses small hooks with something like glass minnows for bait. "Remember, a flag yellowtail's mouth is about the size of a quarter. An average keeper's mouth is closer to dime size, so don't make them work too hard to find the hook."

Requiring much more lead to reach the zone, deep dropping is great in the winter. "Big yelloweye, queen and black snapper, snowy and mystic grouper—they are all around." Hunt's philosophy is that you don't need the best electric reel or even the latest and greatest lights on your rig. For him, the key is controlling your presentation.

"For starters, you are looking for relief in the 600- to 1,200-foot range." Hunt leans towards 8/0 hooks when targeting snapper and 12/0 for grouper. Lead will depend on the depth and current.

Hunt usually power drifts, keeping the motors on to help control the boat. "Even on the drop, you want your drift to be slow and consistent, and the bait should drop straight down. As soon as you get a belly in the line, it feeds out faster than the bait drops. If you combine this with a fast drift, your 10-pound lead is creating a sandstorm on the bottom while it drags along." It's a good time to point out that visitors to The Bahamas must adhere to a snapper-grouper bag limit of 20 fish on the boat—keep count as you go.

Finally, Hunt comes around to pelagics. "Yes, these fish migrate, and yes, many of the yellowfin tuna have left. But there are some around all year. And in the winter, it comes down to finding temperature breaks."

There are a handful of mobile apps that will reveal sea surface temperatures and other satellite-based data, and there are visual signs of a temperature break as well. "The break will form a rip or stack a weedline at the surface. To be honest, if the temperature difference isn't at least 3 to 4 degrees, I don't waste the gas. However, if it is 4 to 5 degrees and there are birds when I get there, I know I am going to catch tuna."

"We try to circle the school with plenty of room. If you see 20 to 40-pound tuna breaking the surface and you are chunking, then you'll likely catch those fish. However, if you get deeper with some baits you stand a chance at some larger tuna."

Captain Hunt is available for extended charters to The Bahamas. Check him out at www.littleadamfishingcharter.com. And don't hesitate to stir up conversations about deer and alligator hunting, or lobster diving—he's a well-rounded *Florida Sportsman.*

ISLAND TIME

CULEBRA, PUERTO RICO @emilflecha

Yenai Flecha, fishing with her father Capt. Antonio Flecha (capt_flecha), is all smiles with her colorful catch. Antonio is a light tackle and fly fishing guide for bonefish, permit, and tarpon on Culebra, a sparsely populated island and surrounding group of cays off the east coast of Puerto Rico.

TOP THAT
TIGRESS XD
XD CRANK TOP MOUNT
Take your spread management to the next level, and save the weight for the scales, with a Tigress XD Crank Top Mount

TIGRESS
OUTRIGGERS & GEAR
TIGRESSOUTRIGGERS.COM

The Florida Keys light up with sailfish in the winter and catching ballyhoo by castnetting or hair-hooking is how most mornings begin. Captain Scott Walker of Duck Key whips up a perfect pancake.

OUTDOOR DIRECTORY

KEYS

Capt. James Chappell
USCG Licensed and Insured
Catchalottafish.com
305-803-1321 • jchappe7@bellsouth.net
Worldwide Sportsman Bayside Marina, MM 81.5
Your Offshore and Inshore NATIVE fishing Specialist!
Reef, Wreck, Offshore, Swordfishing and Tournaments

Beats Land Charters
Come fish with Captain Juan Garcia
DAY TRIPS & NIGHT TRIPS

- Tarpon
- Snapper
- Grouper
- Dolphin
- Redfish
- Seatrout
- Sail
- Reef
- Hogfish
- Mackeral
- Permit
- Shark
- Cobia
- Wahoo
- Tuna
- Snook

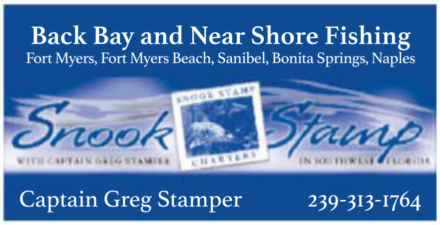
Make your reservation now. **305.297.0438**

LIGHT TACKLE &
FLY FISHING CHARTERS
LOWER FLORIDA KEYS
WWW.FLYINGFISHKW.COM
Flying Fish Charters · Key West · Florida
Capt. Jamie Connell
(305) 304-7667
Capt.JamieConnell@Yahoo.com

SOUTH

Flamingo • North & South Biscayne Bay • Everglades
Get on the "GET EM"
Capt. Alan Sherman
U.S.C.G. Licensed 25 yrs
786-436-2064
shermana@bellsouth.net
getemsportfishing.com

SOUTHWEST



Back Bay and Near Shore Fishing
Fort Myers, Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel, Bonita Springs, Naples
Snook Stamp
With Captain Greg Stamper · Snook Stamp Charters · In Southwest Florida
Captain Greg Stamper 239-313-1764

WEST CENTRAL

Light Tackle & Fly • Artificial Lure Specialist
CAPT. RAY E. MARKHAM
Tampa Bay
Terra Ceia, FL
941-228-3474
Ray.Markham@gmail.com
www.CaptainRayMarkham.com

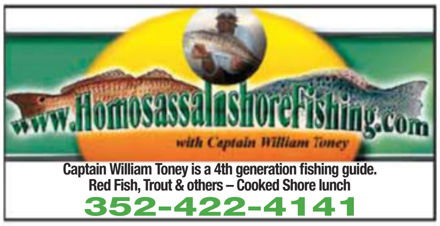
SOUTHEAST

STUART FISHING CHARTERS
INSHORE NEARSHORE OFFSHORE
Captain Jonathan Earhart | 772.341.2274
www.chaosfishingcharters.com

Edge Sportfishing
Capt. George LaBonte
Guided Fishing
My Boat or Yours
561-746-0032
www.EdgeSportfishing.com

BLACK DOG
Fish Pole Bending Co. · Jupiter · Florida
WALK-ON UP TO 10 ANGLERS
DRIFT FISHING
Reservations Suggested
Private Charters Available
PENN PRO STAFF
561-744-5700
SAILING FROM
SQUARE GROUPER TIKI BAR
www.blackdogfishing.com

BIG BEND



www.HomosassaInshoreFishing.com
with Captain William Toney
Captain William Toney is a 4th generation fishing guide.
Red Fish, Trout & others – Cooked Shore lunch
352-422-4141

EAST CENTRAL

Catch a Memory! with Captain Jim Ross
Orlando, Daytona Beach, Cocoa Beach.
Book your light tackle adventure today!
321-636-3728
CaptainJimRoss.com

NORTHWEST

KC SPORT FISHING
MEXICO BEACH, FL
KCSPORTFISHING.COM
FISHING
DIVING
CRUISING
U.S. Veteran Owned & Operated
Captain Kevin Lanier
850-933-8804
KCSportfishing@gmail.com

NORTHEAST

JACKSONVILLE AREA
REDFISH
TROUT
FLOUNDER
Jacksonville
FishingTrips.com
904-866-8055

Speckled Trout
RedFish
Flounder
And more
Capt. David Borries
Backwater Fishing Adventures
Fly Fishing
Light Tackle
Jacksonville, Florida
Cell 904-708-8915
www.backwaterfishingadventures.com

BUYING A BOAT?
GET IT INSPECTED.
Save thousands with
your next boat purchase.
Wilson
YACHT SURVEY
(321) 537-8028
www.WilsonYachtSurvey.com

PETER R. TYSON, INC.
Marine & Aviation Insurance
45 Years of Experience
Comprehensive Coverage for Private Boats & Yachts, Charter, Commercial
Tel: 772-770-0414 • Fax: 772-770-0343
Tyson@PeterRTyson.com
PO Box 644378, Vero Beach, FL 32964

CAPTAIN'S LICENSE
Over 52 USCG Approved Courses
CLASSROOM or ONLINE
NOW AVAILABLE!!!
For Information Call 1-800-BEST-ONE
1-800-237-8663
SEASCHOOL
Serving Mariners Since 1977
www.seaschool.com

CATCH MORE ONLINE
ACTION SPOTTER · FS FORUM · FS.COM
WWW.FLORIDASPORTSMAN.COM

A PASSION
FOR NEW WATERS
MERCURY
YETI COOLERS

One of the world's most accomplished anglers, Carter Andrews is on a relentless quest for new species and new waters. On Outdoor Channel's hit series *The Obsession of Carter Andrews*, he travels to some of the most exotic destinations on earth — in search of the next big bite.

THE OBSESSION OF CARTER ANDREWS

SATURDAYS 10A ET

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Outdoor

WATCH
THE OBSESSION OF
CARTER
ANDREWS
MOTV
MYOUTDOORTV.COM

OLD SALT
FISHING
DIVISION
ST. PETE
CLEARWATER
LADIES DIVISION
DELLA ROPE

Brian Hasson displays the winning kingfish while surrounded by teammates as his son gets a bird's-eye view.

The King and I

LOCAL ANGLER CLINCHES THIRD CROWN FISHING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

BY DOUG KELLY

Big field of anglers, big money at stake. That's been a sweet scenario for Brian Hasson of Safety Harbor. He's won three of the last seven Fall King of the Beach tournaments held out of R.O.C. Park in Madeira Beach and sponsored by the Old Salt Fishing Foundation.

While Hasson seldom enters competitions with a team of novices, in the latest King of the Beach tourney in early November he pulled off the victory with family and friends aboard his 31-foot Contender *99 Problems.* They encountered no problem besting 377 other boats as Hasson's team split a ransom of over $88,000 in cash and prizes.

The *99 Problems* anglers captured not only the one-day event's largest kingfish with a 39-pound smoker, but they also took the Ladies Division with a 28-pounder. The icing on the cake involved Brian's two-year-old son Wyatt, who received the junior crown by way of being the only kid in the tournament.

That latter honor, even though a win by default, hit home with pappa. "I started fishing in this tournament in 1991 with my dad and grandfather," said Hasson. "To see it come full circle with my son on the boat was really special."

Hasson's winning tactics involved catching ladyfish the day before the event. The next morning, he commandeered the boat to a line of stone crab traps off Redington Beach in 18 feet of water where for many years he's encountered action by slow-trolling live ladyfish. His wife Cory, son Wyatt and friends Mike Layton and Jason Schaub wetted lines.

"It was an outgoing flood tide that morning," said Hasson. "A mack skyrocketed one of the baits and after it came back the fourth time, we got the hookup and brought it to the gaff. Around noon with the tide now incoming, a second bite turned out to be the winning fish."

Teams on *Rescue Roofing* and *Lucky Banana* notched second and third respectively in the Overall Division. Thirty-two more divisional winning teams cashed checks from $300 to $4,000. oldsaltfishing.org

FLOUNDER POUNDER

Soon after Teresa and Chip Davis celebrated the birth of their son Tyler 17 years ago, the Jacksonville couple learned the news that he'd been diagnosed with autism. Teresa and Chip rallied around Tyler, and in doing so found inspiration to share with others.

"He's made me a better person," said Chip, and thus the Davis' founded the annual Flounder Pounder for Autism. "It's become one of the most popular tournaments in Northeast Florida, and in the past 13 years we've raised over a million dollars to increase awareness about autism."

An impressive 193 boats took aim at flatties on October 8 and Capt. Jonathan Houston of Jacksonville bested them all fishing alone aboard his 19-foot Pathfinder.

"I fished live finger mullet in less than six feet of water just as the sun arose," said Houston. The local charter captain employed a Carolina rig on a baitcaster reel with 20-pound-test monofilament line and an 8-inch fluorocarbon leader. His total weight

Captain Jonathan Houston, who's cradling the winning trophy, operates Rocketman Charter Fishing and took the day off to support the Flounder Pounder for Autism.

came to 11.03 pounds, earning Houston $5,000 and a trophy featuring a beautiful flounder mount.

Jack Ross came in second and third place went to Eddie Cabler. Kelsey Carter captured the Women's Division and Louie Joseph proved victorious in the Junior Angler Division. For a listing of all the winners, visit flounderpounderjax.com.

'CUDA COUPS

What's silver with vertical bars across its back, black blotches and jagged teeth that would frighten a dragon? No, not yo' mama, we're talking here of barracuda. Although not considered particularly tasty (some would argue otherwise), a barracuda bout on fly or light tackle offers a special sporting challenge.

Even more special: A Florida Keys tournament that features not only typical flats foes such as bonefish and permit, but also barracuda. The 9th Annual Sugarloaf Showdown stepped forward November 10-12 to claim that distinction. Often encountered around reefs and wrecks, 'cuda, as savvy light tackle anglers know, also haunt shallower waters to nab needlefish and other tasty treats.

Scott Brown, a guide out of Sugarloaf Key and Miami guide Honson Lau released four bonefish, three permit and six barracuda—one of the latter meriting the high-point title for that species. Their teamwork earned victory as Grand Champions of the Spin Division with 2,050 points.

Tournament rules specified that barracuda had to be at least 30 inches while bonefish and permit of any size could be photographed and released. A maximum

FS TOURNAMENT CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

FEB. 1-MARCH 31: Women's World Virtual Fishing Challenge, worldwide. www.preschallenge.com

FEB. 7-11: Gold Cup Invitational Fishing Tournament, Palm Beach. www.sailfishclub.com

FEB. 9-11: Cuda Bowl, Key West. www.cudabowl.com

FEB. 11: South Florida Bass Pros, Clewiston. www.southfloridabasspros.com

FEB. 13-18: Bass Pro Tour Stage One, Kissimmee, www.majorleaguefishing.com

FEB. 16-19: Bassmaster Elite Series, Lake Okeechobee. www.bassmaster.com

FEB. 18-19: Fiddler Crab Festival Fishing Tournament, Steinhatchee. www.seahag.com

FEB. 21: Power-Pole Pro Redfish Tour Open, Jacksonville. www.powerpoleredfishtour.com

FEB. 22-26: Sailfish Challenge, Pompano Beach. www.bluewatermovements.com

FEB. 24-25: Backcountry Fly Championship Series, Islamorada. www.bfctournament.com

MARCH

MAR. 3-4: Professional Redfish League Open Division, Steinhatchee. www.professionalredfishleague.com

MAR. 7-11: Jimmy Johnson's Quest for the Ring, Hollywood. www.questfortheringfl.com

MAR. 13-16: March Merkin Invitational Permit Tournament, Key West. www.marchmerkin.com

MAR. 18: Steinhatchee Community Fishing Tournament, Steinhatchee. www.seahag.com

MAR. 29-31: IGFA Light Tackle Open, Palm Beach Shores. www.igfa.org

KEY WEST
Est. 1965
FISHING TOURNAMENT
The Florida Keys & Key West come as you are
OPAL KEY RESORT & MARINA KEY WEST FL
Joppino
Island Dental
Fish with a PRO Historic Charter Boat Row Key West, FL
Charters
Key West PRO GUIDES
SPOTTSWOOD SPOTTSWOOD SPOTTSWOOD STERLING PLLC
MARRIOTT KEY WEST BEACHSIDE
Fish from December 1st. to July 31st.

FREE with no pre-registration

- Certificates for all entries
- Master Angler titles and Most Releases awarded to Men, Women, Junior & Peewee anglers
- Trophies awarded for the heaviest of 37 species in 9 different line classes

KeyWestFishingTournament.com

of three fish of each species could be scored on the two tournament days.

"At the beginning of the day with low light, we went after 'cuda because as the biggest of the three species we could spot them easier," Lau said. Lipped plugs worked just under the surface did the trick.

The team's winning barracuda taped out at 50 inches. Other Grand Champions: guide Nick LaBadie and anglers Jessyca Garlock and Ben Bortner of Key West for the Fly Division; guide Pat Bracher and daughter Charley from Cudjoe Key for the Youth Division.

The Sugarloaf Showdown, presented by the Lower Keys Guides Association, included 27 skiffs scattered amid the Lower Keys with 66 anxious anglers hoping to hoist one of six trophies in both the Fly and Spin divisions as well as three trophies in the Youth Division. Check out lkga.org.

SCOPE IT OUT FIRST

It's said that Alexander the Great liked to visit the site of an imminent battle to scope out the best place to position his army. Tournament anglers could learn a lot from the former King of Macedonia. Brothers Zac and Memphis Zachry made sure they were ready to do battle on the waters surrounding Crystal River.

KING
November 19, 2022
FIRST PLACE WINNER
$10,000
TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS
00/100

Captain Zac Zachry gives a thumbs-up as brother Capt. Memphis shows off their winning haul at Pete's Pier.

The Zachry's scouted the day before the 3rd Annual Pete's Pier King of the Bay Fishing Tournament. The challenge for the anglers on 100 boats in the November event involved catching one redfish and two trout with their combined weight determining winners of the Overall Division. The heaviest gag grouper composed another high-paying division.

"We found a pocket of trout on Friday," said Zac, whose charter business is Tried and True Outdoor Adventures. "We went back the next day and started catching small fish at first but kept casting shrimp, pinfish and Lil' John twitchbaits until we got a couple of big ones."

They next hunted redfish, eventually ogling one cruising within casting distance. Memphis, who operates Fish Crystal River Charters, tossed a topwater plug ahead of it. The red threw a wake behind the plug but for some reason didn't eat, so Zac cast a Creek Chub lure that mimicked a mud minnow in its path. That did the trick, and the duo's red combined with the two trout nailed down first place and a hefty payday of $10,000.

Captain Brandon Branch came in second with Capt. Jeremiah Carlucci third, which merited checks of $1,500 and $500. Captain Rusty Pike's chunky 33-pound gag claimed the $5,000 first-place bounty for biggest grouper.

Tournament proceeds helped non-profits Save Crystal River and Citrus County Blessings. Learn more at petespier.com/tournament. FS

Seaguar

VALUE-PACKED & BUDGET FRIENDLY

GET ALL THE SEAGUAR PERFORMANCE YOU COUNT ON AT PRICES EVERYBODY WILL LOVE

SEAGUAR.COM

BASIX™ STRONG, SOFT, SMOOTH CASTING FLUORO

TACTX™ PRECISION CASTING, 4-STRAND CAMO BRAID

© 2023 KUREHA AMERICA INC.
BASIX 100% FLUOROCARBON
Seaguar 101
PERFORMANCE FISHING LINES
STRONG, SOFT & SMOOTH CASTING
15 LB 200YD 183M
TACTX BRAID & FLUORO KIT
BONUS
15 LB 150YD 137M
8 LB

TOM thumb

17TH ANNUAL MARATHON OFFSHORE

BULL&COW

DOLPHIN TOURNAMENT

GUARANTEED 1ST PLACE $10,000

We reward for participation, only you can grow the jackpot!

60-69 BOATS	70-79 BOATS	80-89 BOATS	90-99 BOATS	100 PLUS BOATS
$13,000	$16,000	$18,000	$20,000	$25,000

Entry fee: $700 on or before April 18th, $800 after April 18th **Fishing boundaries:** Key Largo to Key West

May 5 - May 7, 2023

FrontRunner Boatworks
Audi Fort Lauderdale
Two Conchs Sportfishing
Mercury Go Boldly
The Florida Keys & Key West come as you are
Honey Maker
Furuno
Costa
Tigress Outriggers & Gear
Gillz
Aquarium Encounters Florida Keys
Law Offices of Campbell & Malafy
The Angler's Closet Fishing Apparel & Tackle
Conley Fishing www.conleyfishing.com

ONLINE REGISTRATION ONLY AT

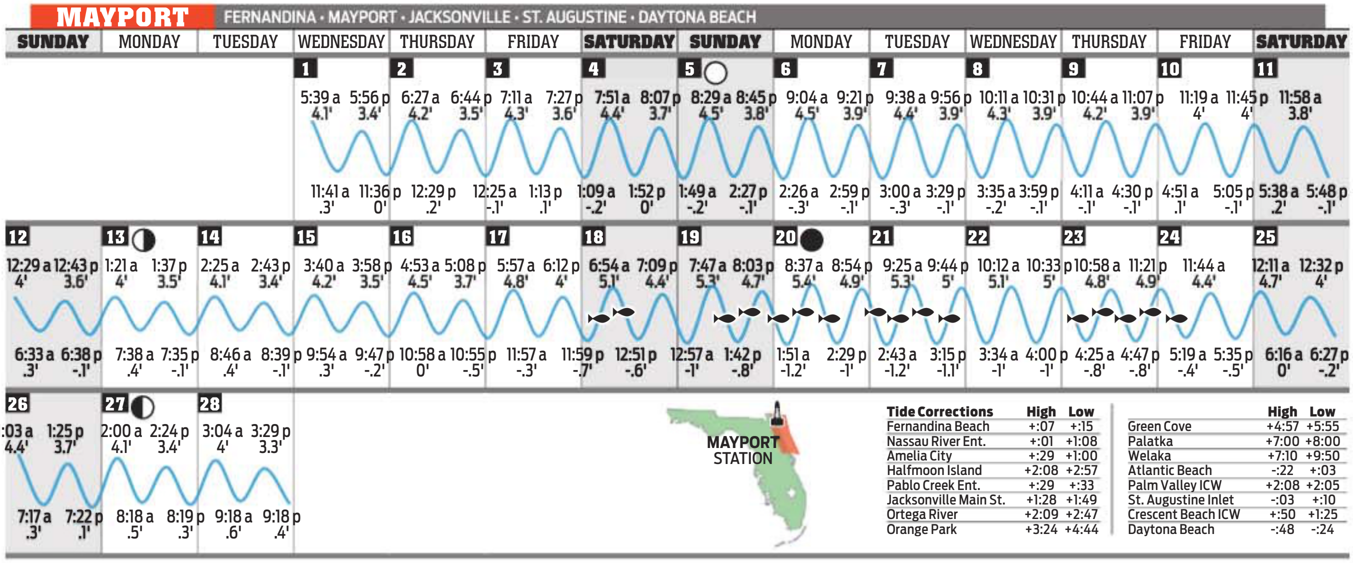
www.MarathonOffshoreTournament.com

305-289-0199

FEBRUARY 2023
FLORIDA TIDES POWERED BY STREAMLIGHT

MAYPORT

FERNANDINA • MAYPORT • JACKSONVILLE • ST. AUGUSTINE • DAYTONA BEACH



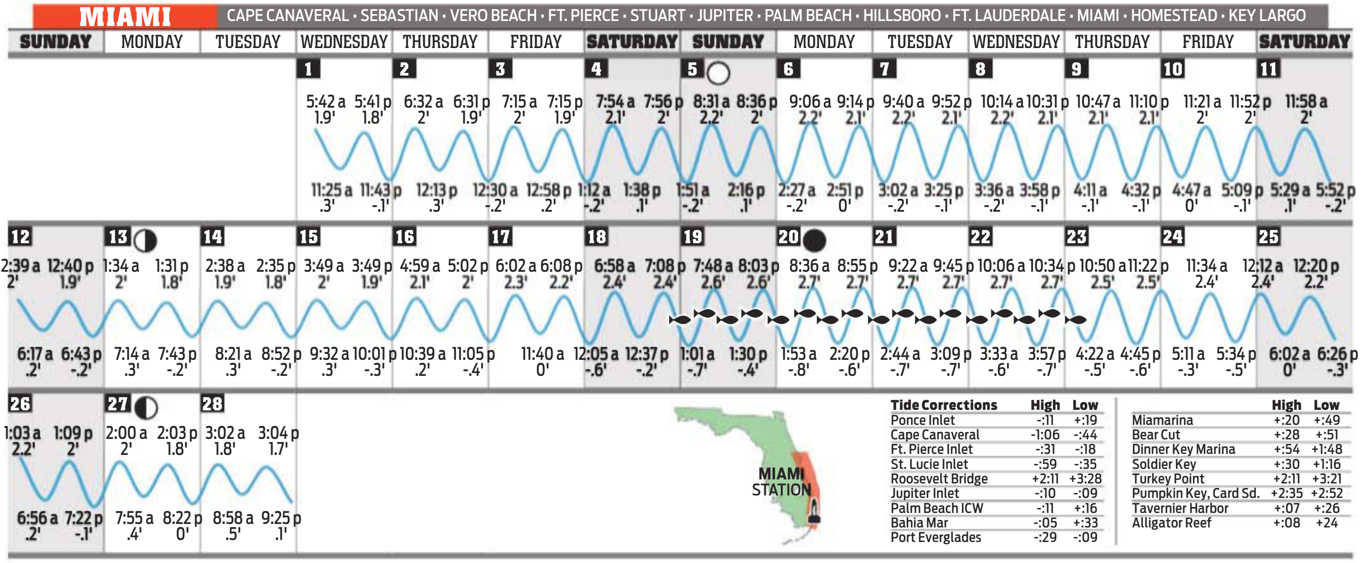
1	5:39 a 4.1'	5:56 p 3.4'	11:41 a .3'	11:36 p 0'
2	6:27 a 4.2'	6:44 p 3.5'	12:29 p .2'	
3	7:11 a 4.3'	7:27 p 3.6'	12:25 a -.1'	1:13 p .1'
4	7:51 a 4.4'	8:07 p 3.7'	1:09 a -.2'	1:52 p 0'
5 ○	8:29 a 4.5'	8:45 p 3.8'	1:49 a -.2'	2:27 p -.1'
6	9:04 a 4.5'	9:21 p 3.9'	2:26 a -.3'	2:59 p -.1'
7	9:38 a 4.4'	9:56 p 3.9'	3:00 a -.3'	3:29 p -.1'
8	10:11 a 4.3'	10:31 p 3.9'	3:35 a -.2'	3:59 p -.1'
9	10:44 a 4.2'	11:07 p 3.9'	4:11 a -.1'	4:30 p -.1'
10	11:19 a 4'	11:45 p 4'	4:51 a .1'	5:05 p -.1'
11	11:58 a 3.8'		5:38 a .2'	5:48 p -.1'
12	12:29 a 4'	12:43 p 3.6'	6:33 a .3'	6:38 p -.1'
13 ◑	1:21 a 4'	1:37 p 3.5'	7:38 a .4'	7:35 p -.1'
14	2:25 a 4.1'	2:43 p 3.4'	8:46 a .4'	8:39 p -.1'
15	3:40 a 4.2'	3:58 p 3.5'	9:54 a .3'	9:47 p -.2'
16	4:53 a 4.5'	5:08 p 3.7'	10:58 a 0'	10:55 p -.5'
17	5:57 a 4.8'	6:12 p 4'	11:57 a -.3'	11:59 p -.7'
18	6:54 a 5.1'	7:09 p 4.4'	12:51 p -.6'	
19	7:47 a 5.3'	8:03 p 4.7'	12:57 a -1'	1:42 p -.8'
20 ●	8:37 a 5.4'	8:54 p 4.9'	1:51 a -1.2'	2:29 p -1'
21	9:25 a 5.3'	9:44 p 5'	2:43 a -1.2'	3:15 p -1.1'
22	10:12 a 5.1'	10:33 p 5'	3:34 a -1'	4:00 p -1'
23	10:58 a 4.8'	11:21 p 4.9'	4:25 a -.8'	4:47 p -.8'
24	11:44 a 4.4'		5:19 a -.4'	5:35 p -.5'
25	12:11 a 4.7'	12:32 p 4'	6:16 a 0'	6:27 p -.2'
26	1:03 a 4.4'	1:25 p 3.7'	7:17 a .3'	7:22 p .1'
27 ◐	2:00 a 4.1'	2:24 p 3.4'	8:18 a .5'	8:19 p .3'
28	3:04 a 4'	3:29 p 3.3'	9:18 a .6'	9:18 p .4'

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Fernandina Beach	+:07	+:15
Nassau River Ent.	+:01	+1:08
Amelia City	+:29	+1:00
Halfmoon Island	+2:08	+2:57
Pablo Creek Ent.	+:29	+:33
Jacksonville Main St.	+1:28	+1:49
Ortega River	+2:09	+2:47
Orange Park	+3:24	+4:44

	High	Low
Green Cove	+4:57	+5:55
Palatka	+7:00	+8:00
Welaka	+7:10	+9:50
Atlantic Beach	-:22	+:03
Palm Valley ICW	+2:08	+2:05
St. Augustine Inlet	-:03	+:10
Crescent Beach ICW	+:50	+1:25
Daytona Beach	-:48	-:24

MIAMI

CAPE CANAVERAL • SEBASTIAN • VERO BEACH • FT. PIERCE • STUART • JUPITER • PALM BEACH • HILLSBORO • FT. LAUDERDALE • MIAMI • HOMESTEAD • KEY LARGO



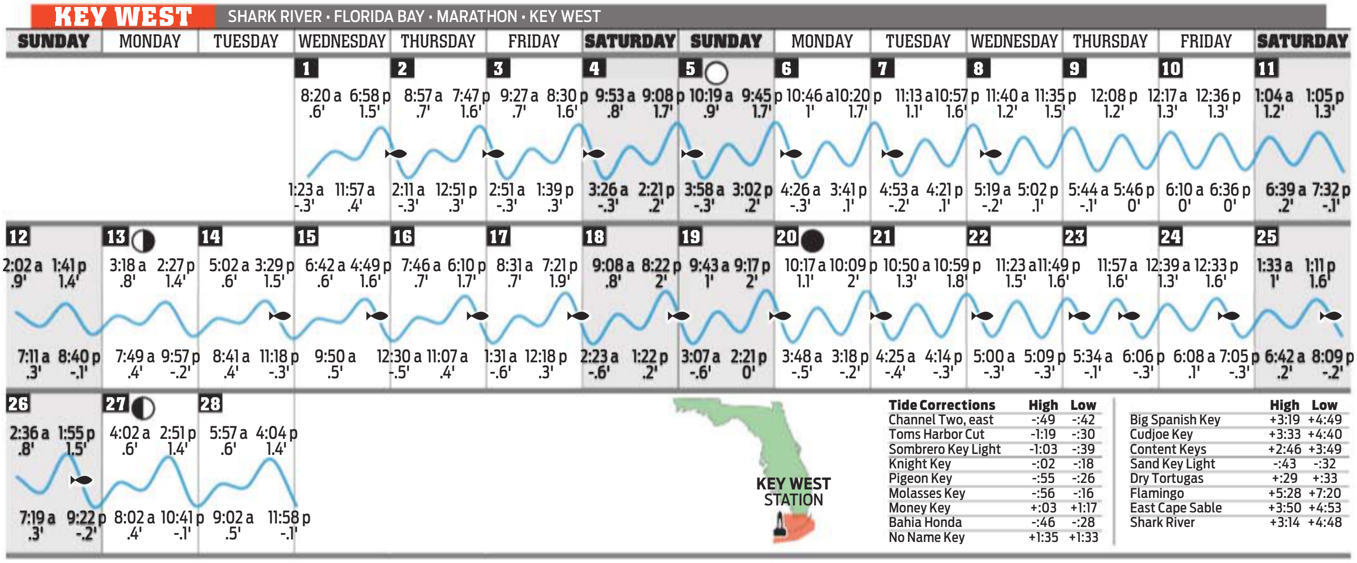
1	5:42 a 1.9'	5:41 p 1.8'	11:25 a .3'	11:43 p -.1'
2	6:32 a 2'	6:31 p 1.9'	12:13 p .3'	
3	7:15 a 2'	7:15 p 1.9'	12:30 a -.2'	12:58 p .2'
4	7:54 a 2.1'	7:56 p 2'	1:12 a -.2'	1:38 p .1'
5 ○	8:31 a 2.2'	8:36 p 2'	1:51 a -.2'	2:16 p .1'
6	9:06 a 2.2'	9:14 p 2.1'	2:27 a -.2'	2:51 p 0'
7	9:40 a 2.2'	9:52 p 2.1'	3:02 a -.2'	3:25 p -.1'
8	10:14 a 2.2'	10:31 p 2.1'	3:36 a -.2'	3:58 p -.1'
9	10:47 a 2.1'	11:10 p 2.1'	4:11 a -.1'	4:32 p -.1'
10	11:21 a 2'	11:52 p 2'	4:47 a 0'	5:09 p -.1'
11	11:58 a 2'		5:29 a .1'	5:52 p -.2'
12	12:39 a 2'	12:40 p 1.9'	6:17 a .2'	6:43 p -.2'
13 ◑	1:34 a 2'	1:31 p 1.8'	7:14 a .3'	7:43 p -.2'
14	2:38 a 1.9'	2:35 p 1.8'	8:21 a .3'	8:52 p -.2'
15	3:49 a 2'	3:49 p 1.9'	9:32 a .3'	10:01 p -.3'
16	4:59 a 2.1'	5:02 p 2'	10:39 a .2'	11:05 p -.4'
17	6:02 a 2.3'	6:08 p 2.2'	11:40 a 0'	
18	6:58 a 2.4'	7:08 p 2.4'	12:05 a -.6'	12:37 p -.2'
19	7:48 a 2.6'	8:03 p 2.6'	1:01 a -.7'	1:30 p -.4'
20 ●	8:36 a 2.7'	8:55 p 2.7'	1:53 a -.8'	2:20 p -.6'
21	9:22 a 2.7'	9:45 p 2.7'	2:44 a -.7'	3:09 p -.7'
22	10:06 a 2.7'	10:34 p 2.7'	3:33 a -.6'	3:57 p -.7'
23	10:50 a 2.5'	11:22 p 2.5'	4:22 a -.5'	4:45 p -.6'
24	11:34 a 2.4'		5:11 a -.3'	5:34 p -.5'
25	12:12 a 2.4'	12:20 p 2.2'	6:02 a 0'	6:26 p -.3'
26	1:03 a 2.2'	1:09 p 2'	6:56 a .2'	7:22 p -.1'
27 ◐	2:00 a 2'	2:03 p 1.8'	7:55 a .4'	8:22 p 0'
28	3:02 a 1.8'	3:04 p 1.7'	8:58 a .5'	9:25 p .1'

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Ponce Inlet	-:11	+:19
Cape Canaveral	-1:06	-:44
Ft. Pierce Inlet	-:31	-:18
St. Lucie Inlet	-:59	-:35
Roosevelt Bridge	+2:11	+3:28
Jupiter Inlet	-:10	-:09
Palm Beach ICW	-:11	+:16
Bahia Mar	-:05	+:33
Port Everglades	-:29	-:09

	High	Low
Miamarina	+:20	+:49
Bear Cut	+:28	+:51
Dinner Key Marina	+:54	+1:48
Soldier Key	+:30	+1:16
Turkey Point	+2:11	+3:21
Pumpkin Key, Card Sd.	+2:35	+2:52
Tavernier Harbor	+:07	+:26
Alligator Reef	+:08	+24

KEY WEST

SHARK RIVER • FLORIDA BAY • MARATHON • KEY WEST



1	8:20 a .6'	6:58 p 1.5'	1:23 a -.3'	11:57 a .4'
2	8:57 a .7'	7:47 p 1.6'	2:11 a -.3'	12:51 p .3'
3	9:27 a .7'	8:30 p 1.6'	2:51 a -.3'	1:39 p .3'
4	9:53 a .8'	9:08 p 1.7'	3:26 a -.3'	2:21 p .2'
5 ○	10:19 a .9'	9:45 p 1.7'	3:58 a -.3'	3:02 p .2'
6	10:46 a 1'	10:20 p 1.7'	4:26 a -.3'	3:41 p .1'
7	11:13 a 1.1'	10:57 p 1.6'	4:53 a -.2'	4:21 p .1'
8	11:40 a 1.2'	11:35 p 1.5'	5:19 a -.2'	5:02 p .1'
9	12:08 p 1.2'		5:44 a -.1'	5:46 p 0'
10	12:17 a 1.3'	12:36 p 1.3'	6:10 a 0'	6:36 p 0'
11	1:04 a 1.2'	1:05 p 1.3'	6:39 a .2'	7:32 p -.1'
12	2:02 a .9'	1:41 p 1.4'	7:11 a .3'	8:40 p -.1'
13 ◑	3:18 a .8'	2:27 p 1.4'	7:49 a .4'	9:57 p -.2'
14	5:02 a .6'	3:29 p 1.5'	8:41 a .4'	11:18 p -.3'
15	6:42 a .6'	4:49 p 1.6'	9:50 a .5'	
16	7:46 a .7'	6:10 p 1.7'	12:30 a -.5'	11:07 a .4'
17	8:31 a .7'	7:21 p 1.9'	1:31 a -.6'	12:18 p .3'
18	9:08 a .8'	8:22 p 2'	2:23 a -.6'	1:22 p .2'
19	9:43 a 1'	9:17 p 2'	3:07 a -.6'	2:21 p 0'
20 ●	10:17 a 1.1'	10:09 p 2'	3:48 a -.5'	3:18 p -.2'
21	10:50 a 1.3'	10:59 p 1.8'	4:25 a -.4'	4:14 p -.3'
22	11:23 a 1.5'	11:49 p 1.6'	5:00 a -.3'	5:09 p -.3'
23	11:57 a 1.6'		5:34 a -.1'	6:06 p -.3'
24	12:39 a 1.3'	12:33 p 1.6'	6:08 a .1'	7:05 p -.3'
25	1:33 a 1'	1:11 p 1.6'	6:42 a .2'	8:09 p -.2'
26	2:36 a .8'	1:55 p 1.5'	7:19 a .3'	9:22 p -.2'
27 ◐	4:02 a .6'	2:51 p 1.4'	8:02 a .4'	10:41 p -.1'
28	5:57 a .6'	4:04 p 1.4'	9:02 a .5'	11:58 p -.1'

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Channel Two, east	-:49	-:42
Toms Harbor Cut	-1:19	-:30
Sombrero Key Light	-1:03	-:39
Knight Key	-:02	-:18
Pigeon Key	-:55	-:26
Molasses Key	-:56	-:16
Money Key	+:03	+1:17
Bahia Honda	-:46	-:28
No Name Key	+1:35	+1:33

	High	Low
Big Spanish Key	+3:19	+4:49
Cudjoe Key	+3:33	+4:40
Content Keys	+2:46	+3:49
Sand Key Light	-:43	-:32
Dry Tortugas	+:29	+:33
Flamingo	+5:28	+7:20
East Cape Sable	+3:50	+4:53
Shark River	+3:14	+4:48

PRIME-TIMER TABLES FEBRUARY 2023

Are fish and game more active during intervals of the lunar orbit? It's a theory. Shown are "prime" times of moonrise, moonset, and when moon is directly over and under Lakeland, midpoint of Florida.

	RISE	SET	OVER	UNDER
1	2:36p	4:22a	9:55p	9:30a
2	3:27p	5:15a	10:46p	10:20a
3	4:21p	6:03a	11:36p	11:11a
4	5:17p	6:47a	No Moon	12:00p
○ 5	6:13p	7:25a	12:24a	12:47p
6	7:09p	8:00a	1:10a	1:32p
7	8:03p	8:31a	1:53a	2:14p
8	8:56p	9:00a	2:35a	2:55p
9	9:50p	9:28a	3:15a	3:36p
10	10:44p	9:56a	3:56a	4:17p
11	11:42p	10:26a	4:38a	5:00p
12	No Moon	10:59a	5:23a	5:47p
◑ 13	12:43a	11:37a	6:13a	6:39p
14	1:48a	12:22p	7:07a	7:36p

FEBRUARY 2023
FLORIDA TIDES *POWERED BY* STREAMLIGHT

ST. PETERSBURG
APALACHICOLA · ST. GEORGE · TAMPA · ST. PETERSBURG · SARASOTA · PUNTA GORDA · FT. MYERS

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 10:21 p 2' 6:09 a -.6'	**2** 11:17 p 2' 6:54 a -.7'	**3** 3:24 p 1.2' 7:33 a -.7' 5:43 p 1.1'	**4** 12:05 a 2' 3:31 p 1.1' 8:06 a -.7' 6:31 p 1'	**5** ○ 12:47 a 2.1' 3:36 p 1.1' 8:35 a -.6' 7:14 p .9'	**6** 1:26 a 2' 3:40 p 1.2' 9:00 a -.5' 7:56 p .7'	**7** 2:04 a 2' 3:47 p 1.2' 9:23 a -.4' 8:40 p .6'	**8** 2:43 a 1.9' 3:59 p 1.4' 9:45 a -.3' 9:27 p .4'	**9** 3:26 a 1.7' 4:17 p 1.5' 10:07 a -.1' 10:17 p .3'	**10** 4:14 a 1.5' 4:40 p 1.7' 10:30 a .1' 11:13 p .1'	**11** 5:11 a 1.3' 5:07 p 1.8' 10:52 a .4'
12 6:27 a 1' 5:41 p 1.9' 12:18 a 0' 11:10 a .6'	**13** ◑ 8:37 a .9' 6:23 p 2' 1:36 a -.1' 11:10 a .8'	**14** 7:18 p 2.1' 3:04 a -.3'	**15** 8:30 p 2.2' 4:28 a -.5'	**16** 9:51 p 2.2' 5:38 a -.8'	**17** 11:07 p 2.4' 6:35 a -.9'	**18** 2:59 p 1.2' 7:24 a -1' 5:41 p 1.1'	**19** 12:13 a 2.4' 3:05 p 1.2' 8:05 a -.9' 6:47 p .8'	**20** ● 1:12 a 2.4' 3:15 p 1.2' 8:42 a -.7' 7:46 p .6'	**21** 2:06 a 2.3' 3:27 p 1.4' 9:13 a -.5' 8:43 p .3'	**22** 3:00 a 2' 3:43 p 1.5' 9:39 a -.2' 9:39 p .1'	**23** 3:54 a 1.7' 4:02 p 1.7' 10:02 a .2' 10:37 p 0'	**24** 4:53 a 1.4' 4:26 p 1.9' 10:20 a .5' 11:40 p -.1'	**25** 6:06 a 1.1' 4:54 p 2' 10:33 a .7'
26 8:05 a .9' 5:28 p 2' 12:50 a -.2' 10:23 a .9'	**27** ◐ 6:11 p 2' 2:10 a -.2'	**28** 7:13 p 1.9' 3:35 a -.3'											

ST. PETERSBURG
STATION

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Carrabelle	+:35	+:45
Apalachicola	+2:00	+2:00
West Pass	+1:40	+1:40
Egmont Key	-2:15	-3:20
Pass-A-Grille Beach	-1:34	-1:30
Johns Pass	-2:14	-2:04
Bradenton	-1:24	-:55
Anna Maria, pier	-2:10	-2:19
Sarasota	-1:38	-:58
Venice Inlet	-2:02	-1:38
Englewood	-:17	-:17
Placida	-:43	-:56
Boca Grande	-:50	-1:42
Punta Gorda	+1:06	+1:27
Captiva Is., outside	-2:20	-2:28
Matlacha Pass	+:43	+1:28
Pineland	-:19	+:26
Cape Coral Bridge	+1:15	+2:02

CEDAR KEY
ST. MARKS · STEINHATCHEE · SUWANNEE · CEDAR KEY · HOMOSASSA · TARPON SPRINGS · CLEARWATER · NAPLES · EVERGLADES CITY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 12:38p 2.2 10:33 p 3.1' 5:36 a -.4' 4:44 p 1.6'	**2** 1:13 p 2.4' 11:28 p 3.2' 6:24 a -.6' 5:46 p 1.5'	**3** 1:42 p 2.6' 7:04 a -.7' 6:36 p 1.3'	**4** 12:16 a 3.3' 2:09 p 2.7' 7:37 a -.7' 7:17 p 1.1'	**5** ○ 12:58 a 3.3' 2:34 p 2.7' 8:07 a -.7' 7:54 p .9'	**6** 1:35 a 3.4' 2:58 p 2.8' 8:35 a -.6' 8:28 p .8'	**7** 2:11 a 3.4' 3:20 p 2.8' 9:02 a -.5' 9:02 p .6'	**8** 2:47 a 3.3' 3:41 p 2.9' 9:29 a -.4' 9:37 p .5'	**9** 3:24 a 3.2' 4:04 p 3' 9:57 a -.2' 10:15 p .3'	**10** 4:05 a 3' 4:30 p 3.2' 10:25 a 0' 10:56 p .2'	**11** 4:52 a 2.8' 5:01 p 3.3' 10:56 a .3' 11:44 p .1'
12 5:48 a 2.4' 5:37 p 3.3' 11:30 a .7'	**13** ◑ 7:03 a 2.1' 6:22 p 3.3' 12:45 a 0' 12:12 p 1.1'	**14** 8:55 a 2' 7:24 p 3.3' 2:04 a -.1' 1:15 p 1.5'	**15** 10:46 a 2.1' 8:43 p 3.3' 3:31 a -.3' 2:52 p 1.7'	**16** 12:03 p 2.4' 10:02 p 3.5' 4:48 a -.6' 4:18 p 1.7'	**17** 12:52 p 2.6' 11:12 p 3.7' 5:53 a -.9' 5:29 p 1.5'	**18** 1:30 p 2.8' 6:47 a -1.2' 6:28 p 1.1'	**19** 12:15 a 3.9' 2:03 p 2.9' 7:33 a -1.2' 7:19 p .7'	**20** ● 1:11 a 4' 2:33 p 3' 8:15 a -1.1' 8:06 p .4'	**21** 2:02 a 4' 3:01 p 3.1' 8:53 a -.8' 8:52 p .1'	**22** 2:52 a 3.8' 3:29 p 3.2' 9:28 a -.4' 9:37 p -.1'	**23** 3:41 a 3.5' 3:57 p 3.3' 10:01 a 0' 10:24 p -.2'	**24** 4:31 a 3.1' 4:26 p 3.4' 10:31 a .4' 11:12 p -.2'	**25** 5:23 a 2.7' 4:58 p 3.4' 11:00 a .8'
26 6:20 a 2.3' 5:33 p 3.3' 12:04 a -.1' 11:30 a 1.1'	**27** ◐ 7:37 a 2' 6:18 p 3.2' 1:04 a .1' 12:03 p 1.4'	**28** 9:33 a 1.9' 7:20 p 3' 2:24 a .2' 1:01 p 1.7'											

CEDAR KEY
STATION

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Alligator Pt.	+:15	+:30
St. Marks	+:15	+:15
Steinhatchee River	+:02	+:00
Suwannee River	+:06	+:18
Tarpon Springs	-1:16	-1:03
Dunedin	-1:50	-1:45
Clearwater	-1:48	-1:35
Indian Rocks	-:57	-:52
Naples	-1:30	-1:40
Marco, Caxambas Pass	-1:10	-1:10
Cape Romano	-:30	-:45
Indian Key	-:35	-:20
Dismal Key	+:05	+:20
Everglades City	+:55	+1:45
Lostmans River ent.	-:20	+:20

PENSACOLA
PENSACOLA · DESTIN · PANAMA CITY · PORT ST. JOE

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 7:34 p 1.2' 6:23 a -.7'	**2** 8:33 p 1.2' 7:17 a -.7'	**3** 9:22 p 1.2' 8:01 a -.7'	**4** 10:02 p 1.2' 8:33 a -.7'	**5** ○ 10:34 p 1.1' 8:55 a -.7'	**6** 11:04 p 1' 9:07 a -.6'	**7** 11:36 p .8' 9:11 a -.4'	**8** 9:06 a -.3'	**9** 12:18 a .6' 4:06 p .3' 8:46 a -.1' 8:16 p .3'	**10** 1:26 a .4' 3:00 p .5' 7:59 a .1' 10:53 p .1'	**11** 2:49 p .7'
12 3:07 p .9' 12:36 a -.2'	**13** ◑ 3:50 p 1.1' 2:03 a -.4'	**14** 4:54 p 1.2' 3:28 a -.5'	**15** 6:09 p 1.4' 4:47 a -.7'	**16** 7:26 p 1.5' 5:56 a -.9'	**17** 8:36 p 1.6' 6:56 a -1'	**18** 9:38 p 1.6' 7:47 a -1'	**19** 10:37 p 1.4' 8:29 a -.9'	**20** ● 11:37 p 1.1' 9:01 a -.6'	**21** 9:17 a -.3'	**22** 12:46 a .8' 2:15 p .3' 8:59 a .1' 7:17 p .1'	**23** 2:29 a .5' 1:27 p .6' 7:30 a .3' 9:50 p -.1'	**24** 1:34 p .9' 11:42 p -.3'	**25** 2:03 p 1.1'
26 2:46 p 1.2' 1:15 a -.4'	**27** ◐ 3:41 p 1.2' 2:42 a -.4'	**28** 4:51 p 1.2' 4:01 a -.5'											

PENSACOLA
STATION

Tide Corrections	High	Low
Port St. Joe	-1:06	-1:45
Panama City	-:57	-1:11
Wetappo Creek	+1:01	+1:40
Lynn Haven	-:31	-1:01
West Bay Creek	-:10	-:47
Harris, Narrows	+1:37	+2:51
Destin Pass	-:33	-:34
Pensacola Pass	-1:23	-:34
Warrington	-:27	-:30
Lora Point	+:36	+1:03
Bay Point	+1:23	+1:27

	RISE	SET	OVER	UNDER
15	2:56a	1:15p	8:06a	8:37p
16	4:02a	2:17p	9:09a	9:42p
17	5:05a	3:26p	10:14a	10:46p
18	6:01a	4:39p	11:18a	11:48p
19	6:50a	5:52p	12:18p	No Moon
● 20	7:32a	7:03p	1:14p	12:47a
21	8:09a	8:09p	2:06p	1:40a
22	8:44a	9:13p	2:55p	2:30a
23	9:17a	10:15p	3:42p	3:18a
24	9:51a	11:17p	4:30p	4:06a
25	10:26a	No Moon	5:19p	4:54a
26	11:04a	12:18a	6:08p	5:43a
◐ 27	11:46a	1:18a	6:59p	6:34a
28	12:32p	2:16a	7:50p	7:25a

MOON PHASES

◐	○	◑	●
First Quarter	Full Moon	Last Quarter	New Moon

🐟 Maximum Tidal Flow

MINN KOTA

MORE FUNCTION.
MORE FUN.
FISH FOR
MORE

© 2022 Johnson Outdoors Marine Electronics, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

GET MORE OUT OF YOUR TIME ON THE WATER WITH MINN KOTA®

Every Minn Kota® is made to help you get more of what you came for. Get on fish. Stay on fish. And put more fish in the boat. And when you connect your Minn Kota to a Humminbird®, the One-Boat Network® unlocks all new ways to hook up on the water. Because when you fish with us, you fish for more.

› minnkotamotors.com/more

MINN KOTA
MINN KOTA
TERROVA

I'M A FLORIDA SPORTSMAN

The Duck Nut

Alex Pomareda on promoting duck hunting and access to public lands in Florida.

BY KATY HENDEE

I joined the Florida Duck Hunters group on Facebook to get more involved in the duck hunting community, and that's how I met this Alex character. He's known locally as "The Duck Nut" for his concerns about proper duck hunting and his involvement in charitable organizations associated with the sport. The guy intrigued me. I wanted to pick his brains about who he is, what was behind the scenes in today's Florida duck hunting world, and what might be some concerns future generations may face.

In the Glades with Alex Pomareda.

Alex Pomareda, 48, lives with his two dogs, a large pig named BBQ, and owns Quackskins, a camo apparel brand business, and a marketing company, Gator-data.com. Formerly of Queens, NY, he lives in Boca Raton—but this time of year spends as much time in the Everglades as he does at home.

His participation as a leading duck-hunting expert for the Wounded Warrior Project, an organization meant to help veterans, stems from the respect he has for his father who served in the Vietnam War. Over the past decade, Alex has built collaborations with the South Florida Water Management District, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Ducks Unlimited, and a wide audience of like-minded duck hunters through social media networking.

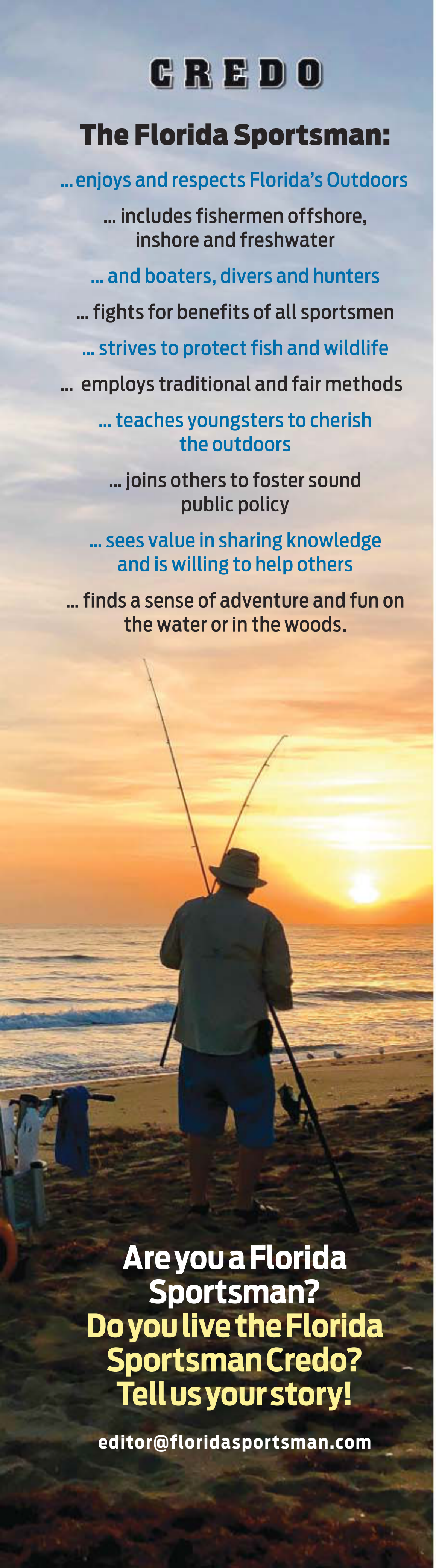
Alex explains how it is important to maintain a voice for hunters in the legislative process. If a hunter has no voice, the availability of lands to hunt will decline drastically: it's hard enough to accommodate the number of hunters now with the limited grounds available. Alex persistently stays in Water Management District and FWC meetings. He speaks up to recommend opening new wetlands for new hunting opportunities, or to keep existing areas open. And, he encourages other hunters to do the same.

Alex also wants these wetlands to stay open so organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project can have a shot (so to speak) at a good duck hunt. Alex donates to the organization every year duck hunting kayaks, guns, ammo, and camo and helps identify places for them to hunt. Alex promotes the gatherings, so any veteran out there gets the message: Join and have a good time! It's important to Alex that anyone who wants to get involved can do so, and anyone who might have trouble doing so, deserves help.

On top of the Wounded Warrior assistance, he organizes and runs the youth hunt that's been put on every year for 20 years by United Waterfowlers - Florida, an organization of which he's a board member. The torch was passed down to him two years ago by Newton Earl Cook, a longtime South Florida duck-hunting advocate. I reckon these duck nuts can sniff each other out, eh? Alex will find sponsors, do extensive promoting, and donate his camo, time and gear to the youth event. Alex says, "Bringing the kids together out in nature to embrace camaraderie is the healthiest dose of mental wellness you can give, and that's why I am here." FWC grants them access every year to Stormwater Treatment Area 1 West, a well-known duck hunting area.

After a hard day's work helping out the duck hunting community, you can most likely find Alex the Duck Nut riding his airboat through gator-infested swamps, smoking his cigars and looking for new areas to hunt. FS

Editor's note: *This year's dates for veterans and active military waterfowl hunts are Feb. 4-5. The final youth (age 15 or younger) waterfowl hunting day takes place Feb. 11 (the season began with a youth hunt in November.) The FWC has all the information online about who qualifies, plus suggested locations, special events and contact numbers. The general waterfowl hunting season concluded January 29. Visit myfwc.com/hunting.*



CREDO

The Florida Sportsman:

... enjoys and respects Florida's Outdoors

... includes fishermen offshore, inshore and freshwater

... and boaters, divers and hunters

... fights for benefits of all sportsmen

... strives to protect fish and wildlife

... employs traditional and fair methods

... teaches youngsters to cherish the outdoors

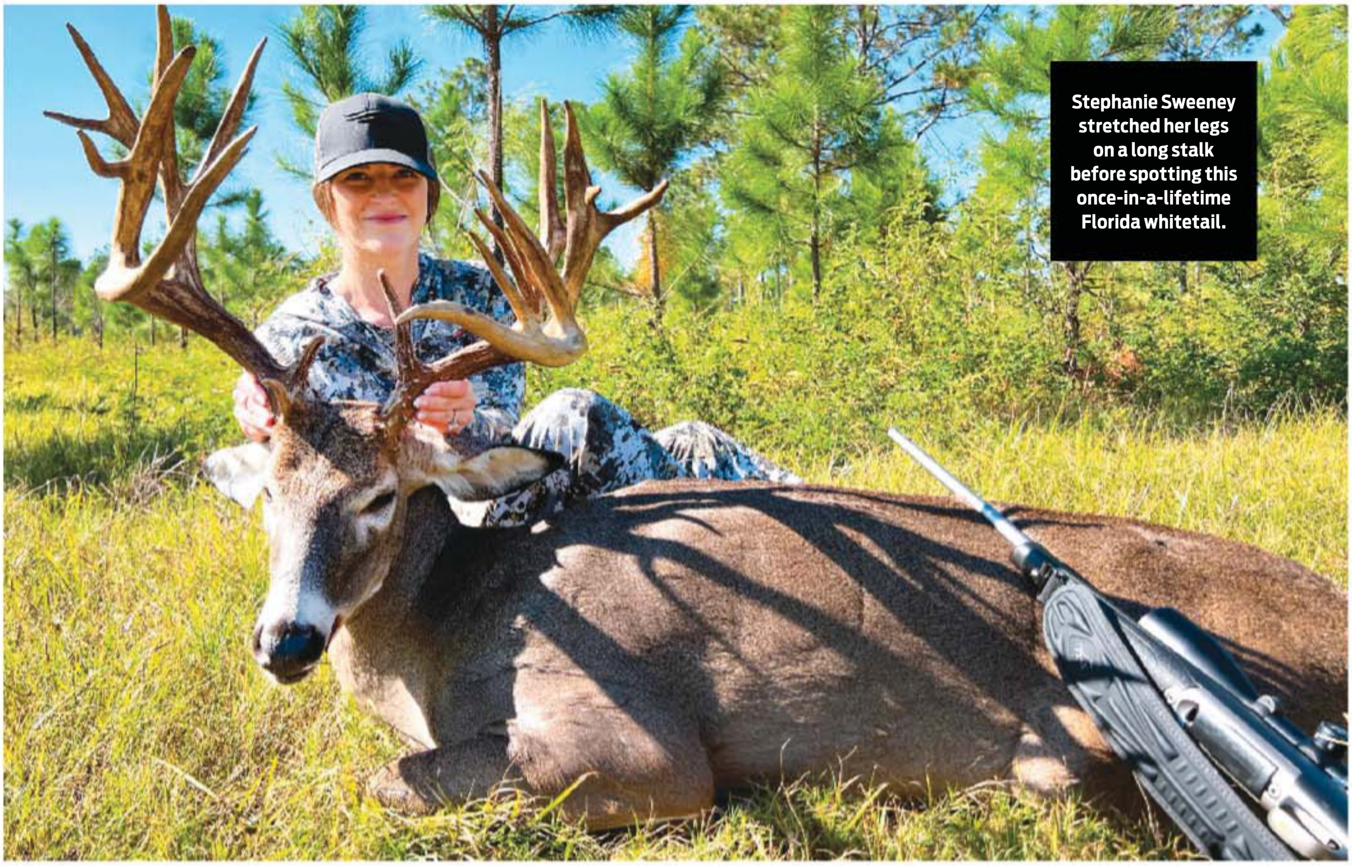
... joins others to foster sound public policy

... sees value in sharing knowledge and is willing to help others

... finds a sense of adventure and fun on the water or in the woods.

Are you a Florida Sportsman?
Do you live the Florida Sportsman Credo?
Tell us your story!

editor@floridasportsman.com



Stephanie Sweeney stretched her legs on a long stalk before spotting this once-in-a-lifetime Florida whitetail.

Hitting Blackjack

Hunter bags 21-point buck in Hamilton County.

BY STEVE DOUGHERTY MANAGING EDITOR

If you want to shoot a trophy buck, then the Midwest is a great place to do it. In Florida, the weather is often hot and humid, the mosquitos are giant, native sandy soils that are poor in nutrients hinder antler growth, and our management zones, seasons, and regulations are complex.

However, there are indeed big whitetails slipping through the pine thickets, palmettos, oak hammocks, swamps, and agricultural pastures across the Sunshine State. Just ask Stephanie Sweeney, who shot a 21-point buck on private land in Jennings, Florida, in November 2022. “We were invited to hunt our friends' property—The Legacy Ranch. I sat the first morning and saw a little eight-point come out, but he was just like the one I shot last year in Alabama, so I let him walk,” Sweeney reflects. “We saw a few other deer, lots of does, and the morning hunt was coming to an end. Ryan, who was acting as the guide, asked if I was interested in stalking. So, Ryan and I walked about 250 acres. We scared off a bunch of deer but kept walking and walking and walking. I was like, darn, I'm not going to see anything worth shooting. I was thinking we would just go back up to the bunkhouse and I'd hunt again in the evening.”

Little did Stephanie know that she would soon come across a whitetail with a rack covered in a dizzying number of points that would rough score at 213 inches.

“I scanned the woods one more time just to make sure that I wasn't missing anything. At last glance, I saw this buck standing about 80 yards away from me in the thick wood line. All I could make out was his silhouette. Thankfully, there was a huge tree about 20 yards in front of me. I thought he couldn't see me, but he spotted me right away. We locked eyes at the exact same time. It was a beautiful sight,” Sweeney says.

With its massive 21-point rack, it was a mature buck that The Legacy Ranch had identified on trail cameras before, but never in the flesh. “He wasn't sure about me, but didn't move right away, so I cut the pie on him. It was going to be a chest shot but he turned at the last second. It got him through the shoulder and heart. He ran about 20 yards and dropped right there. It was amazing.”

Women are certainly putting down big deer in Florida, as Stephanie's recent North Florida hunt proves, and we congratulate her on the buck of a lifetime. Sweeney, 35, works at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville.

“You know, someone recently said to me, ‘You'll never be excited about another buck again.’ But that will not be the case because I just love being in the woods.” FS

SEND US YOUR STORY If you have had an interesting, exciting or funny experience in the outdoors, tell us about it and send us a picture: It might qualify as “An Outdoor Happening.” If your story is chosen, you'll receive a Florida Sportsman gift pack worth over $100. Send your story and one or more photos to Outdoor Happening, Florida Sportsman, 3725 SE Ocean Blvd., Suite 202, Stuart, FL 34996. Or email: jeff@floridasportsman.com

Dusky
33
Dusky 33!!!

When people think Dusky, they think **TOUGH.** After all, every legendary Dusky boat hull is individually produced with more hand-laid fiberglass than any other boat in its class.

The Dusky 33 is no different. She's our biggest and baddest in the fleet. With a ton of seating and room for rod holders galore, you get comfort and a great ride all in a stable watercraft that will go anywhere and do everything.

She features a variable degree stepped hull (20°, 25°, 35°) that cuts through any type of seas and provides lift. The bow flare will help keep occupants dry and comfortable. Her 100% composite, hand-laminated construction with traditional Dusky toughness assures you'll be riding those seas decades into the future. As with all our models, you can customize to suit your specific needs.

Give us a call to schedule your factory tour and experience the Dusky Difference for yourself.

Dusky

SUZUKI
MARINE

FACTORY DIRECT

Photos depict optional upgrades not included in the base pricing. Advertised prices are base boat & motor.

110 N. Bryan Road, Dania Beach, FL 33004 • (954) 922-8890 • www.dusky.com

Star brite
STAR TRON

START, RUN, STORE WITH STAR TRON

Star brite
STAR TRON
ENZYME FORMULA
RING CLEAN+
MARINE MOTOR TREATMENT
Powerful Enzyme Formula
+ Deposit Control Technology
Removes and Prevents Carbon and Gum Deposits
TREATS 160 GALLONS
Net 16 US fl oz (473 ml)
Star brite
STAR TRON
Enzyme Fuel Treatment
STABILIZES UP TO 2 YEARS
& HELPS:
Eliminate Carbon Deposits, Gum & Varnish
Prevent Moisture Buildup, Phase Separation
Clean Injectors, Valves & More
Star brite
STAR TRON+
STABILIZER+
FUEL STORAGE
ENZYMES
+
CORROSION INHIBITORS

START

START YOUR SEASON RIGHT WITH **RING CLEAN+**

RUN

RUN FASTER, CLEANER, SMOOTHER WITH THE ORIGINAL **ENZYME FUEL TREATMENT**

STORE

STORE WITH CONFIDENCE USING NEW FUEL STORAGE **STABILIZER+**

www.STARTRON.com